🟥 PlayStation 3 🟨 PlayStation Portable 🟩 PlayStation Network 🟦 PlayStation 2

PlayStation®

The Official Magazine

HOLIDAY 09

PlayStation - The Official Magazine Issue 27 (Holiday 2009)

PLACE
THUMB

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

- Blood
- Intense Violence
- Sexual Content
- Strong Language

ASSASSINSCREED.COM

Text **Ezio** to **44144** for Exclusive Offers

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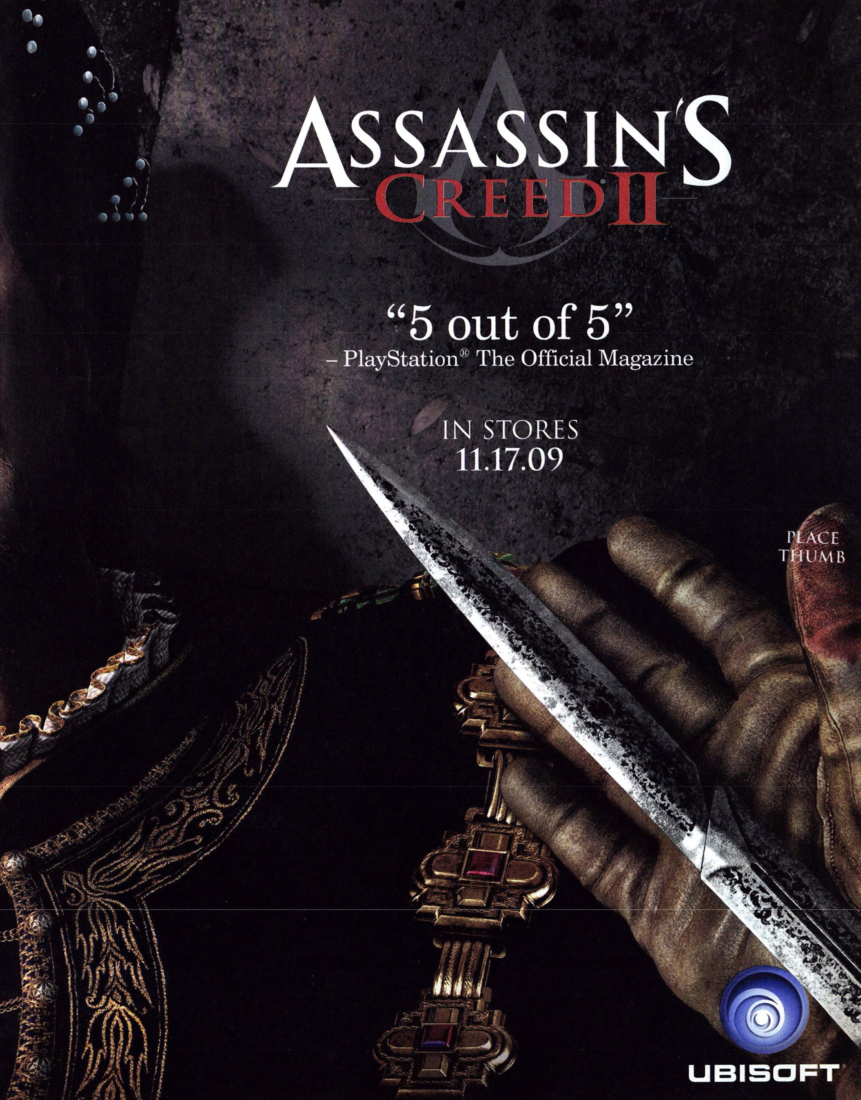
ASSASSIN'S
CREED® II
"5 out of 5"
– PlayStation® The Official Magazine
IN STORES
11.17.09
PLACE
THUMB
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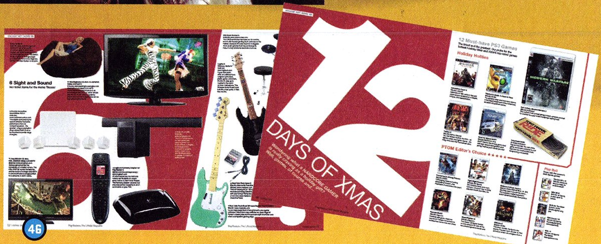
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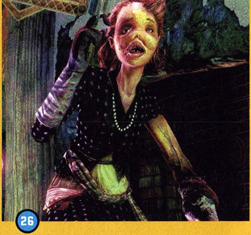

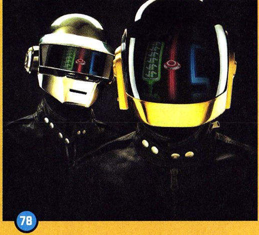

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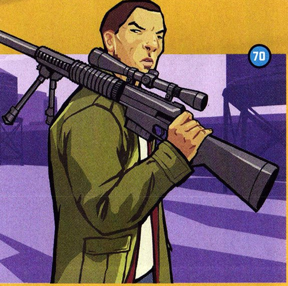

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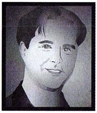

Editor's Note

"Now, you've got a corpse in a car, minus a head, in a garage. Take me to it." – Pulp Fiction

You're right. It *would* have made sense to start this holiday issue with a heartwarming, inspirational quote from a classic holiday special. Something from *It's a Wonderful Life, A Charlie Brown Christmas,* or even my own favorite holiday special, *Nestor the Long-Eared Christmas Donkey.* But when I started thinking about the holiday season and this issue of *PlayStation: The Official Magazine,* the gruesome sentence above kept popping back into my mind. No, *Pulp Faction* isn't exactly a holiday movie, actor Harvey Keitel looks nothing like Santa Claus and his character is named "The Wolf", not "The Reindeer." Nonetheless, this was the quote that inspired me the most.

Chances are you are now thinking either, "What is WRONG with this guy?" or "Where on Earth is he going with this?" So let's take a few moments to unwrap an answer for the second question (you're on your own with the first one).

I thought about the flood of games that hit store shelves every year. Even after the Great Games Exodus of 2009, when 80-percent of everything moved to January and February (see page 14), there's more out there than you can play or afford. It's maddening. But we're here to help. Turn to our always-vital reviews section, to this month's *Assassin's Creed II* cover feature on page 38, and to the feature that calls out 10 under-the-radar games you're in danger of overlooking on page 58. You readers honor us by paying good money for our magazine, and we view it as our job to reward that honor with rock-solid advice on how best to spend the rest of your hard-earned dollars.

> "Chances are you are now thinking either, 'What is WRONG with this guy?' or 'Where on Earth is he going with this?'"

Then I began to consider the gift-buying season. We gamers are a challenge to shop for because we're often very picky in ways non-gamers don't understand. So Roger constructed a massive gift guide you can hand to your loved ones and say "See? This is what I want." On the flip side, if you have no idea what to get for the folks on your list, there's plenty of stuff in there that anyone would love. Just grab some of the non-game items, wrap 'em in shiny paper, and get right back to playing *Uncharted 2.*

You see where I'm going now, right? This issue of PTOM is The Wolf. As a reader, you're just like John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson in the film. Granted, your hairstyle is probably different, you likely enjoy a different profession, and we *really* hope your particular crisis is less horrifying. But the point is: if you care as much about gaming as we do here at PTOM tower, this can be an overwhelming time of year. And like The Wolf, we're here to guide you through the tough bits and make it all seem like no problem at all. Thanks for reading, have a joyous, safe holiday, and here's to a great 2010.

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ASSASSIN'S CREED II
EXCLUSIVE WORLD FIRST REVIEW
ESSENTIAL PLAYTESTS
REVIEW MEGALOAD
BAD BUZZ GREAT GAMES!
256 WAYS TO DIE
PlayStation
The Official Magazine

Double Coverage

Assassin's Creed II cover boy Ezio has two hidden wrist daggers, so it seemed a decent excuse to give this issue two different covers. Out in the wild, you'll see Ezio doing what he does best: shoving something sharp into someone else's soft parts. And subscribers will get the second cover, which showcases one of the aforementioned implements of bloodletting. Which do you prefer? Let us know at PTOM_Letters@futureus.com.

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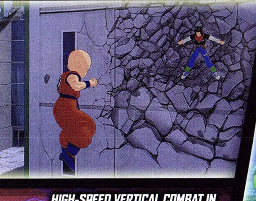

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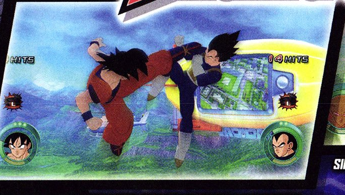

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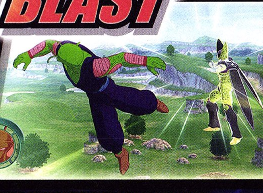

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THE 10

The stories everyone's talking about

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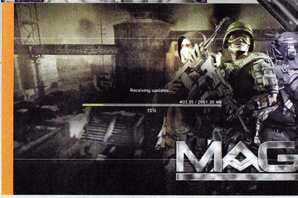
S.V.E.R.
RAVEN
R

1 60 MINUTES WITH MAG

We do a one-hour recon of the biggest online shooter ever

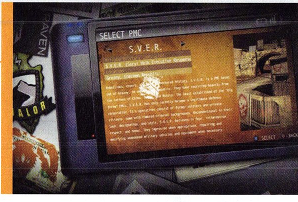
19:00 HOURS Alright, we downloaded the beta earlier today, so we're all set to play some *MAG* for the mag… Sorry, couldn't resist such a massive play on words.

19:01 Or maybe we're not so ready. Looks like Zipper Interactive has already released a few updates (which makes sense—they're trying to fix it as they go). Better get patching.


Receiving updates...
403.35 / 2661.35 MB
15%
MAG

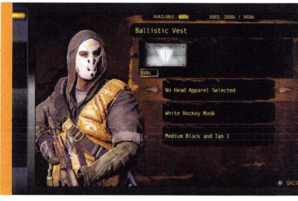
19:40 Ok, after a major false start, we're finally ready to play. The anticipation has merely sharpened our desire to kill…and work cooperatively with our team or whatever.

19:42 The Start screen casually reminds us that this is not the final game. Graphics, audio, features, none of it's perfect yet. Please keep that in mind as we describe our impressions.

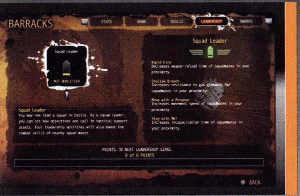

RAVEN
VALOR
SELECT PMC
S.V.E.R.
SELECT
BACK

19:44 All right, creating a new character. Time to pick a team: the seasoned Valor, the slick, efficient Raven, or the vicious S.V.E.R. We're going for S.V.E.R. because, hey, who doesn't love an underdog?

19:46 Picked a voice and a face; now it's time to adjust our weapons loadout. Options seem pretty limited when you start (only three primary weapons, no attachments or auxiliary equipment), but there are slots available for more equipment. Do we have to earn new weapons or are they simply not available in the beta? Oh well, at least we get a hockey mask.


AVAILABLE: 600c
USED: 2800c / 3400c
Ballistic Vest
600c
No Head Apparel Selected
White Hockey Mask
Medium Black and Tan 1
BACK

19:52 Taking a second now to explore the "Barracks," which lists your stats, rank, leadership capacity (you can literally fight


BARRACKS

Squad Leader

NOT QUALIFIED

Squad Leader
You may now lead a squad in battle. As a squad leader, you can set new objectives and call in tactical support assets. Your leadership abilities will also boost the combat skills of nearby squad mates.

Squad Leader

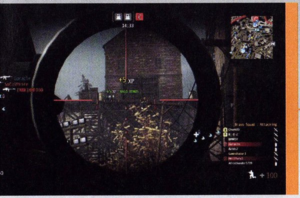
Rapid Fire
Decreases weapon reload time of squadmates in your proximity.

Shallow Breath
Increases resistance to gas grenades for squadmates in your proximity.

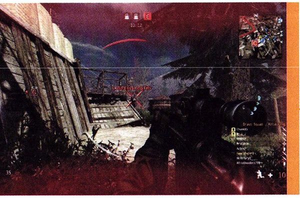
Move with a Purpose
Increases movement speed of squadmates in your proximity.

Stay with Me!
Increases incapacitation time of squadmates in your proximity.

POINTS TO NEXT LEADERSHIP LEVEL
0 of 0 POINTS



13:43
Bravo Squad : Attacking



your way up the command chain and earn extra abilities), and unlockable skills, which are organized by the type of solider they might apply to, such as Marksman, Assault, Electronics, Close Quarters, and so on. The upgrades are mostly what you would expect: faster reload times, extra attachments, and the like.

19:59 Finally time to play! Hopping into the only game available: a 32-vs.-32–player Sabotage match. Basically, our team just has to take control of two points and then destroy a third. Easy.

20:01 The match starts and everyone takes off running. Hang on, guys, aren't we supposed to have a plan or something?

20:05 We just headed for the big blinking "A" on our heads-up display and stumbled into a massive firefight at the base of the first control point. Both teams have actually dug themselves in pretty well. We're going to flank right…

20:07 Picked off a couple guys…but then got caught. We're going to select another preset loadout before we re-spawn. The AK-47 felt a little light and poppy, and we want more punch. Time to grab the rifle.

20:10 We're having a bit of trouble figuring out where to go. Everyone seems pretty scattered. The sniper rifle was a good choice, though. Earning XP *Modern Warfare*-style.

20:12 Most people seem to have headsets, which is a good sign for a game that really requires you to work as a team. Too bad these guys won't shut up about sniper rifles. Come on team, focus!

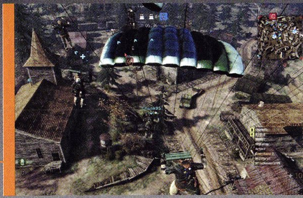
20:14 "Too close for missiles. Switching to guns." Er, well, grenades. Whatever, *Top Gun* was a great movie. (By the way, we got gunned down immediately after this.)

20:15 Right after our little grenade incident, a teammate swung by and revived us before we bled out. Right on! We tried to thank him via headset but he didn't respond.

20:19 Without upgrades, the sniper rifle doesn't zoom very far and isn't a guaranteed one-shot kill. However, there isn't much recoil either. We're having a grand time just runnin'-and-gunnin' with it (and yes, this time *we* got the kill).

20:21 Got three in a row! But then got wasted as we tried to heal ourselves with our med gun. Can't win 'em all.

20:22 However, it turns out that you can parachute into certain spawn points. That almost makes it worth dying.

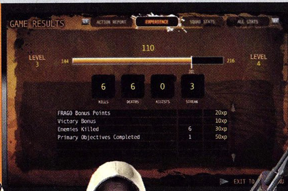


20:25 Oh great, a camper behind our spawn point. Will someone take care of him, please?

20:29 Success! Our team takes home the win, and we escape with a boatload of experience. We would have been happier with fewer deaths, but when it's 32-on-32, death comes from all directions.

Mission De-brief

Okay, so it was more like an hour-and-a-half with *MAG,* but we couldn't foresee the major updates we'd have to install. And even with the extra time, we still didn't fully experience the commander responsibilities—like on-the-fly frago orders—that will set *MAG* apart from other online shooters. Overall, the game felt a bit chaotic, but as noted, it hasn't been finalized yet. Some of that inital impression is likely due to our limited hands-on time with *MAG,* but we expect measures will be taken to improve the situational awareness of in-game events. Still, a fun-filled hour.

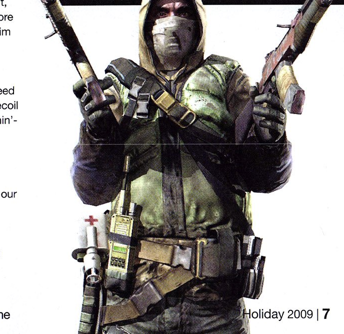

GAME RESULTS

110

LEVEL 3 144 — 216 LEVEL 4

KILLS	DEATHS	ASSISTS	STREAK
6	6	0	3

FRAGO Bonus Points		20xp
Victory Bonus		10xp
Enemies Killed	6	30xp
Primary Objectives Completed	1	50xp



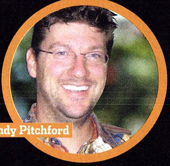
2 First-Person Shooters ARE DEAD

The creators of *BioShock*, *Borderlands*, and *Deus Ex* tell us why RPG/shooter hybrids are killing everything...except *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*

Ken Levine

Harvey Smith

Raphael Colantonio


Randy Pitchford

Role-playing games like *Final Fantasy* and *Doom*-style first-person shooters used to be two great tastes that nobody thought would taste good together. But just like that first guy who put barbeque sauce on a pizza, pioneering first-person shooters like *System Shock*, *Deus Ex*, and *BioShock* created new flavors by adding generous doses of RPG-style character customization to all the bullets and flying gibs. Now it's hard to find FPS games that *don't* have role-playing elements. The genre as we knew it is virtually extinct.

We tracked down four designers who made these new hybrids happen and asked them how these two genres continue to merge, evolve, and transition into something previously unknown.

A System Shock No Longer

Examples of each genre affecting the other abound. One of 2008's most acclaimed games, Besthesda's *Fallout 3*, is a first-person RPG with lots of FPS-style guns and exploding craniums. Conversely, dozens of first-person shooters—*BioShock, Far Cry, Borderlands*—have evolved to incorporate role-playing elements.

Ken Levine, Creative Director on *BioShock* and the Director on a new, unannounced project at developer 2K Boston, explained it this way. "[RPG-style] growth is here and it's paying huge dividends on the shooter genre. It's almost expected now. I was playing the *Uncharted 2* multiplayer demo last night, and there it was. *Red Faction: Guerrilla.* Boom, there it is. It's going to be everywhere."

"In part, [there] is an ongoing drive to model more elements of reality, turning them into challenging and interesting game systems along the way," said Arkane Games' Designer Harvey Smith, who was Lead Designer on *Deus Ex* and *Deus Ex: Invisible War.* "My hope is that action games continue to get richer. Every now and then you get some magical combination, like *BioShock* or *Portal,* or earlier *Underworld* or *Arx Fatalis.* The shooter and the RPG have been absorbing useful aspects of one another for a long while."

Gearbox's President Randy Pitchford *(Borderlands, Brothers in Arms)* doesn't see that the feelings produced in RPGs and shooters to be mutually exclusive anymore. "Leveling up feels good. Making choices that are meaningful to the gameplay is fun. Mixing this all up is really compelling. *Borderlands* is incredibly fun and addicting because of how it's taken traditional RPG elements for growth, discovery and choice and blended it with the raw fun of the core gameplay of a shooter."

New models: BioShock 2 and Borderlands

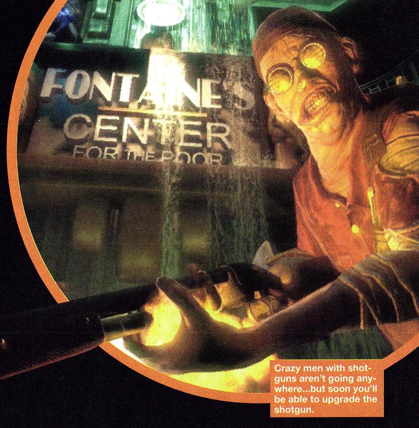
2007's first-person shooter *BioShock* took players to an underwater city known as Rapture. Thanks to sophisticated artificial intelligence routines, *BioShock's* characters had "lives" of their own. This created an RPG-like sensation that the world carried on even if the player wasn't around.

"In Bioshock, you can watch a Big Daddy for a while. It does not spawn when you open a door, ready to fight. It is active in the environment with you, not necessarily hostile, and it behaves according to some consistent rules," says Raphael Colantonio *(Arx Fatalis* and *Dark Messiah),* Smith's partner at Arkane Games. "Suddenly, you have an idea: Attack him, lure him into another area, and turn him hostile to another enemy. That's an incredibly strong moment...and it's not possible in all games."

BioShock also gave players a sophisticated plotline and moral choices, both elements predominantly found in traditional RPGs. The sequel, *BioShock 2* (due in February), builds on the original game's sophisticated AI systems and moral examination, giving us a new enemy, the "evil" Big Sister, and puts players into the role of one of the first game's enemies, the Big Daddy.

"I think one of the most interesting developments [in FPSs] is trying to bring across and deepen mechanics from RPGs, but without some of the more abstract methods of the past; adding new mechanics,

Much like this off-beat pairing of a cute girl and a battered robot, the new era of shooters brings form and function together in new and exciting ways. Just like cyborgs.



Crazy men with shotguns aren't going anywhere...but soon you'll be able to upgrade the shotgun.

but presenting them in the game world in a more elegant way," says Smith.

Post-apocalyptic open-world shooter *Borderlands* takes the addictive collecting and character-building qualities that make RPGs like *Diablo* and *World of Warcraft* multi-million sellers, and blends them with the fluid action of shooters.

"The RPG-style elements do not fight against the shooter [elements] in *Borderlands,"* said Pitchford. "Instead, the RPG elements layer on top to create more motivations and more rewards for the moment to moment behaviors. I think this is going to change things. I expect that after Borderlands we'll see more and more RPG-style elements being drawn into our shooters. I'm certain I'm not the only game designer who anticipates this."

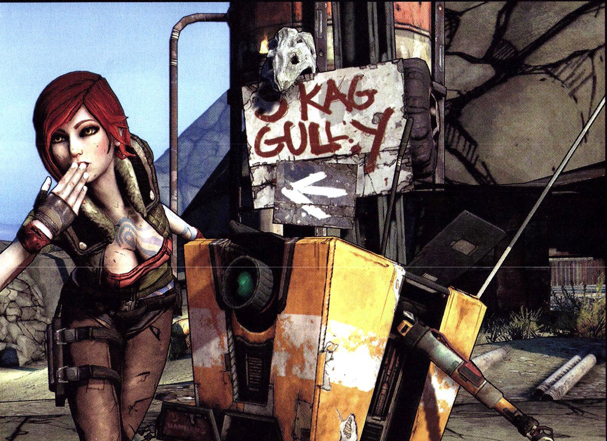
Confronting *Call of Duty*

Retailers believe that because of the long-standing recession, consumers will only buy big-named games this holiday. Activision's *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* is plowing into November like a rampaging elephant on fire, sending countless lesser-known games scurrying into 2010 just to get away from it. How will RPG-shooter hybrids perform against this year's 800-pound gorilla?

"Anyone who just carbon copies is going to fail," said Smith. "People are afraid of risk, but as players we all want the next step...novelty and richness in games. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* innovated in so many ways and presented such a high level of polish that there's a lot to learn from the game. I'm sure each developer responded to it differently. For me, the controller interface revolutionized my enjoyment of FPS on a console, two of the semi-interactive story moments choked me up, and the multiplayer unlock system [not unlike an RPG leveling-up system] was stunningly cool. And, somehow, all of it was presented in a very accessible way."

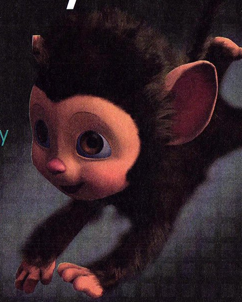
Pitchford adds, "To me, *Call of Duty* is like a thrill ride at the theme park—it's exhilarating, but super-crafted, on-rails, and over quickly. I think people who enjoy that rush will, before too long, think about getting out there and going for a more real-world thrill—like sky diving or scuba diving. *Call of Duty* is the big dog this round, but it wasn't in the last (something else was) and it probably won't be in the future. I tend to like to bet on the future—that's why I bet so much on *Borderlands."*

"Here's the thing about guys like Infinity Ward... Don't try to beat them at their own game. They're the best at what they do."



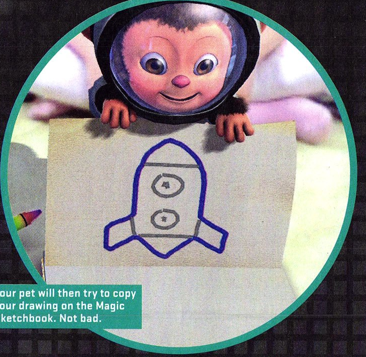
Levine puts it another way. "Here's the thing about guys like Infinity Ward (developers of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2).* Don't try to beat them at their own game. They're the best at what they do. Don't try to out-croon Sinatra. Don't try to out-pitch Josh Beckett. Don't try to out-boogie Tony Manero. At 2K Boston/Irrational we always did our own kind of thing. And we're going to focus on that. And when we venture into some new spaces (which we will) we're going to find the path less traveled. And we're going to

3 Baby Einstein?



EyePet is waaaay smarter and more adorable than you'd think. Are real pets obsolete?

First, find someone who can draw. Okay, now sketch an object like a car, a plane, or in this case, a rocket and show it to the camera.



Your pet will then try to copy your drawing on the Magic Sketchbook. Not bad.

It can draw, it learns songs you sing it, and when it sleeps, it dreams of you. Sony's *EyePet* is designed to make you believe that the cheerful monkey/kitten/puppy thing on your TV is a living, breathing creature. And wow, is it convincing. By using the PlayStation Eye camera to combine you and your living room with this impish rogue, *EyePet* creates a remarkably realistic little illusion.

Your creature can track the tiniest movement, engaging with anything he sees. Rub your fingers on his head and he'll nuzzle them. Push your hand toward him, and he'll bounce backwards, scowling.

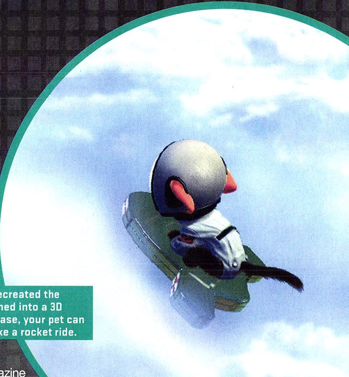
And he's certainly loveable. Even hardened gamers may find themselves happily feeding, cleaning, stroking and playing with the squeaky imp for hours on end. Or completing daily challenges, from taking photos of your animal to hitting high scores in bowling games to digging a little garden to earning pet clothes or new or upgraded toys.

But don't be fooled: cute though it may be, EyePet is no simple, boring pet sim. Amazingly, it can actually learn. Bring out his stereo and sing a few notes; he'll warble them back. We taught ours "Baa Baa Black Sheep," then marvelled as he began singing it later that day.

For some real magic, hold a drawing up to the camera and your pet will sketch what he sees. He's a little patchy if the outline isn't clear, but mostly, he'll faithfully recreate your art. Best of all, objects drawn in his Magic Sketchbook will come to life, so if your pet draws the elements of a plane, you can actually put them together and make a plane for him to fly around in.

As a piece of tech, *EyePet* is incredible—it really showcases the potential of PS Eye. As an actual gaming experience it's utterly heartwarming, though admittedly not exactly a game at all. We've only just met EyePet, but we honestly admit—with some manly embarrassment—to looking forward to seeing those big, round eyes smiling at us through our TV again.

> How does the pet respond to cruelty? Honestly, we didn't have the heart to find out—yet.



Once your pet has recreated the image, it can be turned into a 3D object. And in this case, your pet can actually use it to take a rocket ride.

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MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Crude Humor
Violence

4 A FIRM DISCUSSION WITH **ERIC LEMPEL**

We speak to SCEA's Director of PlayStation Network Operations about the one issue that affects all PS3 gamers equally: Firmware

PTOM: Can you tell us a little about what goes into creating a Firmware update? What's the basic process from start to finish?

Eric Lempel: The whole idea is to really see what works, what we can improve on, and what we can add. We go about doing that in a few different ways. We do consumer research in addition to following our roadmap. We've had a very long roadmap of features that we've wanted to roll out, and clearly all of them couldn't be rolled out day one when the PS3 launched. So we've been implementing these features as we go along, and some of them take longer than others. There are still plenty of features on that roadmap. But there are plenty of times that we deviate from that plan or modify that plan a bit based on what's working and, in some cases, maybe some things that haven't been working that well… And I would say that while you do see a lot of things that are consumer facing come out of the Firmware updates, there are a ton of things that go into them behind the scenes as well. So whereas you may have seen an update where it had kind of a small feature or a little enhancement, there may have been a lot of great things in that Firmware update for developers to make games better or to help improve the way tools work for them.

What generally limits how much you can squeeze into an update? Is it planning or manpower or what?

Of course time and manpower always factor in because there aren't limitless resources. And there are sometimes key features that must go out in Firmware updates. For example, you saw on September 1, we released the 120GB PS3 and we did a Firmware update, and there were some enhancements in that specifically to bring on the new hardware. But occasionally we deviate from those plans… When [the features] are ready, we want them out!

Do you ever look to the community when choosing which features to add next, or is it more a matter of following that roadmap you mentioned?

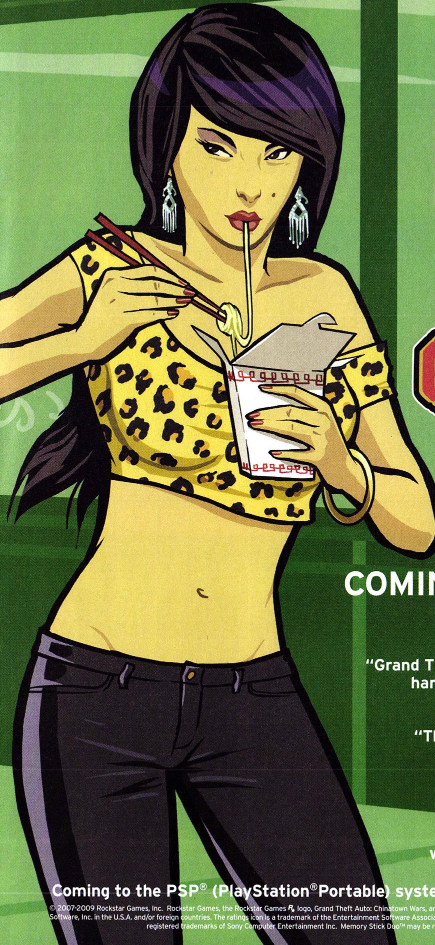
We absolutely read all the feedback that we see on our blog when we do the firmware updates. We have people who look across different forums and different sites. And we also do our own testing—some very extensive testing, some qualitative and quantitative tests with users. There have been plenty of times that people have commented on things and we've made changes based on what they've said. Some of them have been small and some have been bigger. But in some cases, we can't do complete testing because you never quite know how things will work until users have it.

We actually ran a poll recently in which we asked readers to name their most desired new feature, and the number one item was cross-game voice chat. What are the chances of that showing up in a Firmware update at some point in the future?

I think it's incredibly popular. We know users want it, and like lots of other things that work cross-games, technically, it's complicated. But it's definitely something we're looking at.

Are you, personally, satisfied with how far the PS3's Firmware has come and where it is today?

What really gets me excited is when I think about 2006, when I first got on the PS3, and where we were then and how much it's changed since we've come to where we are today… It's incredible. I look back and I'm just like "Wow!" We started out with a store that looked completely different, we didn't have background downloading, we had a whole bunch of settings and controls that were a little complicated and not that easy to use, we didn't have remote play, we didn't have DLNA, we couldn't play certain file types like DIVX, there was no Blu-ray Live, and then there's the big ones: There was no in-game XMB, there was no Trophy system. So I'm extremely satisfied with what we've been able to pull off over the years, and those are just a few of the big features. But there's still a lot more I'd like to see the PS3 do. ■



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Drug Reference
Sexual Content
Strong Language
Violence

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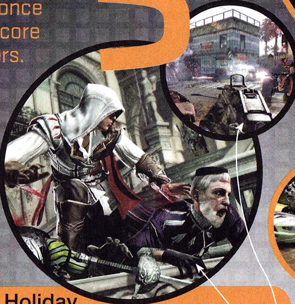
SANTA IS A SLACKER 5

The holiday season once meant the biggest score of the year for gamers. Not anymore

Every single year prior to 2009, the months leading up to the holiday season have been absolutely flooded with big-name game releases. We're talking torrential downpours here—gamers could have drowned. But this year is shaping up a little differently.

Thanks to a staggering number of delays, this November—traditionally the single most release-heavy month—is looking a bit sparse. And strangely enough, many of the games that were originally scheduled to drop in November have fled to February.

In fact, February 2010 is shaping up to be a better month for gaming than November 2009. Don't believe us? Well we've taken every PS3 game that's launching during these two months (as of press time) and assigned it a "hype" score based on what we perceive to be level of excitement surrounding it. Even if you disagree with our hype scores, the results are surprising.



Holiday

Hype Score	Release Date	Title
1	3-Nov	Band Hero
2	3-Nov	Rock Band: LEGO
2	3-Nov	Star Wars The Force Unleashed: Sith Edition
5	10-Nov	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
2	10-Nov	Dragon Ball: Raging Blast
1	10-Nov	Buzz: Quiz World
1	10-Nov	Chaotic: Shadow Warriors
3	17-Nov	God of War Collection
5	17-Nov	Assassin's Creed II
3	17-Nov	Dragon Age: Origins
1	17-Nov	Scene It: Bright Lights Big Screen
1	17-Nov	Planet 51
3	17-Nov	Tony Hawk RIDE
1	24-Nov	Karaoke Revolution
3	24-Nov	Avatar

Total 34

February

Hype Score	Release Date	Title
3	1-Feb	Aliens vs. Predator
2	1-Feb	Two Worlds 2
2	2-Feb	R.U.S.E.
4	2-Feb	ModNation Racers
2	9-Feb	Star Ocean: Last Hope
4	9-Feb	Dante's Inferno
5	9-Feb	BioShock 2
3	15-Feb	Singularity
3	16-Feb	White Knight Chronicles
4	16-Feb	Heavy Rain
3	23-Feb	Lost Planet 2
1	23-Feb	Sonic Racing

Total 36

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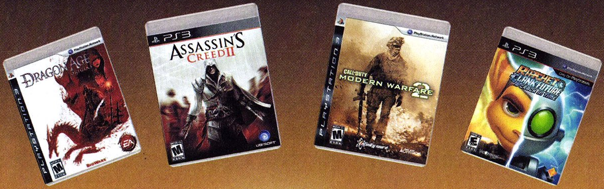
Dragon Age Origins
PS3
Assassin's Creed II
Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2
PS3
Ratchet & Clank Future A Crack in Time

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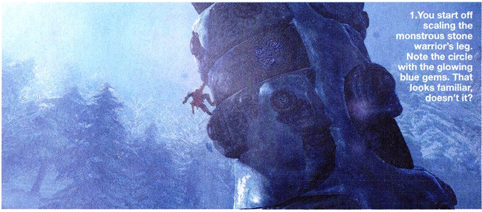
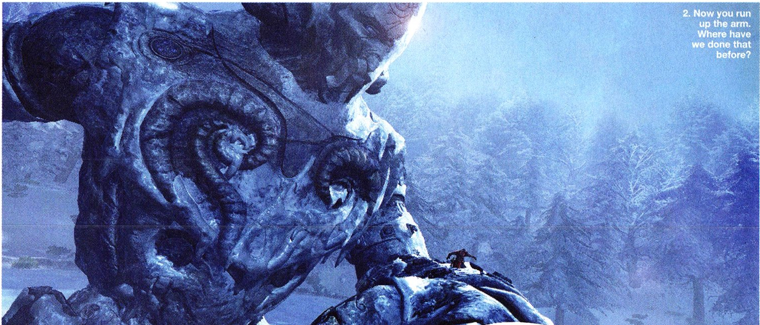
6 NEW CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW SCREENS LOOK STRANGELY... **COLOSSAL***

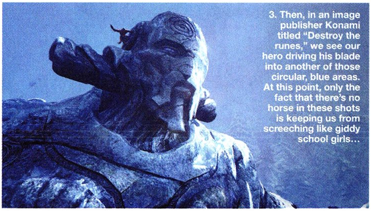
How can you tell if your buddy has played the PS2 cult-classic *Shadow of the Colossus,* in which the player and his horse went around climbing and killing Godzilla-sized living statues with glowing weak points? Well, yes, you could just ask. But it would be much more fun to show him these new screens of *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* and see if he gasps in excitement. We're not about to declare this an unofficial sequel or anything (though we'd desperately love to), but it's obvious that the developers of this new *Shadow* have spent some time with a certain older, similarly named game.



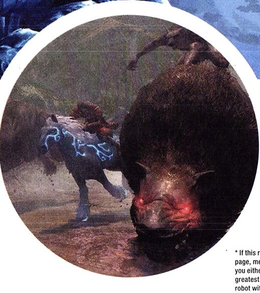
1. You start off scaling the monstrous stone warrior's leg. Note the circle with the glowing blue gems. That looks familiar, doesn't it?



2. Now you run up the arm. Where have we done that before?



3. Then, in an image publisher Konami titled "Destroy the runes," we see our hero driving his blade into another of those circular, blue areas. At this point, only the fact that there's no horse in these shots is keeping us from screeching like giddy school girls...



4. Oh, wait... Yep, grab your earplugs. This might get loud...

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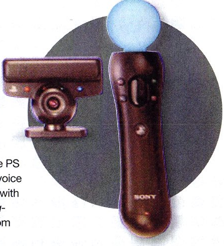
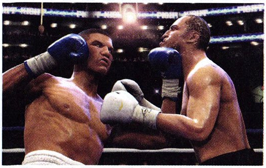
* If this reference, and indeed this entire page, mean nothing to you, please be aware you either have not played one of the single greatest games on PlayStation 2 or you are a robot with no soul and poor taste in games to boot. Just so you know.

7 Moving **Forward**

Motion controls are coming to *LittleBigPlanet* and *Resident Evil 5.* But what other games deserve to be set in motion?



Sony revealed at September's Tokyo Game Show that its motion control system—which combines the PS Eye and a new, wand-like controller—will be "capable of recognizing and tracking a user's face and voice as well as body motion" and announced plans to "vigorously promote" its new control scheme both with games created specifically for the controller and by adding motion functionality to existing titles like *LittleBigPlanet* and *Resident Evil 5* (now sporting the *Director's Cut* subtitle). But what other games would benefit from motion control? We name two that would put the Sixaxis to shame and one to be avoided at all cost.

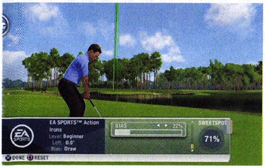


Fight Night Round 4

Yes, we know, the Wii already has a boxing game, but here's the thing: Sony's motion controller will be far more sophisticated than the Wii-mote. For instance, it will be able to accurately gauge movement of the controller toward and away from the TV, as well as the location of the controller relative to your face. So imagine holding a controller in each hand, bobbing and weaving in real time as you land a flurry of satisfyingly impactful punches on Mike Tyson's big, tattooed melon. Awesome, right?

Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3

The motion controller could finally provide a lasting solution to seemingly insurmountable issue of controlling real-time strategy games on a console. With just a flick of the wrist, you could highlight a group of units, point to where you'd like them to go, and send them on their way even more easily than you could with a mouse and keyboard. Combine this with the voice command system from *Tom Clancy's Endwar* and you'd have the most intense, authentic battlefield-command simulation ever.


EA SPORTS™ Action
Irons
Level: Beginner
Left: 0.0°
Bias: Draw
BIAS
22%
SWEETSPOT
71%
DONE
RESET

No Sports games, please

We don't know about you guys, but the idea of throwing a non-existent football over and over again is about as appealing as a *Leisure Suit Larry* game—same with attempting to swing a motion-controller-shaped bat or whack an invisible hockey puck. Just about the only sports that could possibly work are golf and tennis, but it's difficult to imagine those being anything be intensely boring and maddeningly clumsy, respectively. Do us a favor, Sony, and remember that many gamers choose videogames over sports for a reason. If the motion controls don't legitimately enhance the action, don't force it.

The Games

Though we know very little details about these games, here's a tentative list of Sony's first round of motion controller-specific games. (Note: games designated with an asterisk are pre-existing titles that will be patched to support the new control system.)

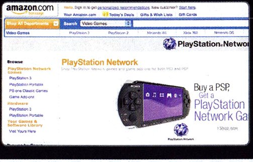
- Ape Escape
- Echochrome 2
- Eccentric Slider
- Sing and Draw
- Champions of Time
- Motion Party
- The Shoot
- Tower
- PAIN *
- Flower *
- Hustle Kings *
- High Velocity Bowling *
- EyePet *

Did you know that "motion controller" isn't the official name? It's true. Sony hasn't actually announced a name for the product. What do you think the motion controller should be called? Email us at PTOM_Letters@futureus.com with your suggestions.

8 Welcome to the **Jungle**

PSN content is now available through Amazon.com

With all the success of the PlayStation Store, Sony decided to open a second location, this time on Amazon.com. Located at Amazon.com/playstationnetwork, the PSN section already offers more than 200 pieces of downloadable content, including full PSP and PSN games, as well as add-on content for PS3 titles. But how, you ask? When you make a purchase, Amazon emails you a redemption code for your product, which you then punch in to your PS3 and voila—no more tracking down those ultra-rare PSN cards, dealing with a virtual wallet, or attaching a credit card to your PSN account. Plus, you can retrieve your code any time you need to re-download a game. The future is here, and it sure is convenient.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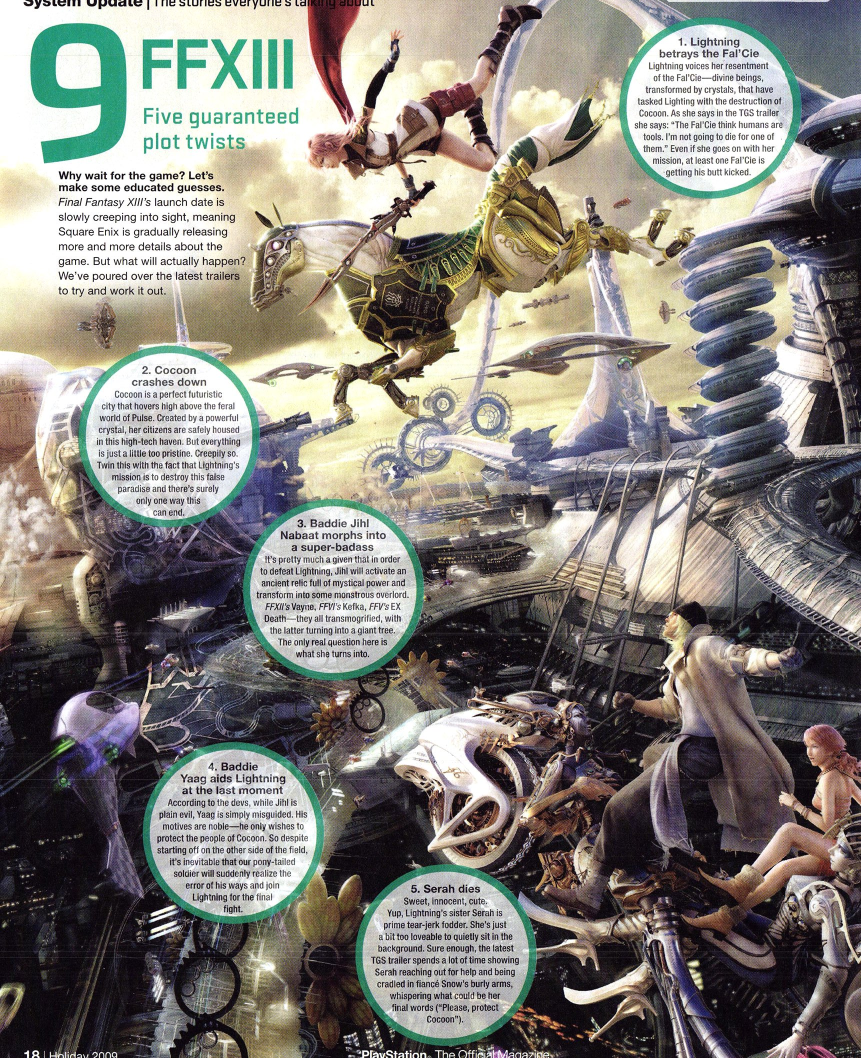
9 FFXIII

Five guaranteed plot twists

Why wait for the game? Let's make some educated guesses. *Final Fantasy XIII's* launch date is slowly creeping into sight, meaning Square Enix is gradually releasing more and more details about the game. But what will actually happen? We've poured over the latest trailers to try and work it out.



1. Lightning betrays the Fal'Cie

Lightning voices her resentment of the Fal'Cie—divine beings, transformed by crystals, that have tasked Lighting with the destruction of Cocoon. As she says in the TGS trailer she says: "The Fal'Cie think humans are tools. I'm not going to die for one of them." Even if she goes on with her mission, at least one Fal'Cie is getting his butt kicked.

2. Cocoon crashes down

Cocoon is a perfect futuristic city that hovers high above the feral world of Pulse. Created by a powerful crystal, her citizens are safely housed in this high-tech haven. But everything is just a little too pristine. Creepily so. Twin this with the fact that Lightning's mission is to destroy this false paradise and there's surely only one way this can end.

3. Baddie Jihl Nabaat morphs into a super-badass

It's pretty much a given that in order to defeat Lightning, Jihl will activate an ancient relic full of mystical power and transform into some monstrous overlord. *FFXII's* Vayne, *FFVI's* Kefka, *FFV's* EX Death—they all transmogrified, with the latter turning into a giant tree. The only real question here is what she turns into.

4. Baddie Yaag aids Lightning at the last moment

According to the devs, while Jihl is plain evil, Yaag is simply misguided. His motives are noble—he only wishes to protect the people of Cocoon. So despite starting off on the other side of the field, it's inevitable that our pony-tailed soldier will suddenly realize the error of his ways and join Lightning for the final fight.

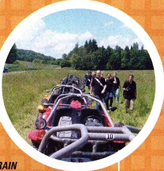
5. Serah dies

Sweet, innocent, cute. Yup, Lightning's sister Serah is prime tear-jerk fodder. She's just a bit too loveable to quietly sit in the background. Sure enough, the latest TGS trailer spends a lot of time showing Serah reaching out for help and being cradled in fiancé Snow's burly arms, whispering what could be her final words ("Please, protect Cocoon").

10

THE BURNING QUESTION

Our question this month: What's the craziest thing your development team has ever done to relieve the pressure of those marathon-programming sessions?



David Cage

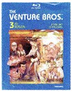
QUANTIC DREAM, CO-CEO AND WRITER/DIRECTOR OF *HEAVY RAIN*

We booked 50 buggies and spent a day doing a chase hunt in the Fontainbleau forest near Paris. It was a race between 10 teams of five buggies with a map of the area and a camera, with the objective to take pictures of specific clues to be discovered. When we left the garage for the forest, we drove through the streets escorted by police cars to stop the traffic for us. 100 people in 50 buggies escorted by cops. That was something. We spent the day driving in the area trying to find clues, driving from castle to castle in the forest, and we had dinner all together in the evening.

Our take: Seriously? A go-kart–bound scavenger/treasure hunt in the French countryside? Where do we sign up?

ETCETERA

All the *other* stuff that delights the PTOM crew and distracts us from our work—and helps us keep in touch with our inner-child. "There, there…it'll be okay."



The Venture Bros., Third Season | Blu-ray | $28.99 (Amazon)

The geekier you are (like Eric), the more you'll love this decidedly adult cartoon series, a lovingly brutal parody of superheroes and villains—as well as Jonny Quest, Scooby-Doo, the '80s in general…pretty much *everything.* The main cast: a clueless-but-arrogant inventor, his two moronic sons, and their killing machine of a bodyguard, is brilliant. And while some episodes and characters aren't perfect on their own (stupid Moppets), the total package is must-see entertainment.

Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark | Book | $15.99

While the rest of the PTOM staff is busy with their Christmas shopping, Carlos the Intern is still fixated on his favorite holiday, Halloween. Alvin Schwartz's collection of American Folklore horror tales is *muy* scary as advertised, but Carlos says its Stephen Gammell's artwork that creeps him out the most. Look up his name on Google images and try *not* to be scared. True story of Carlos' delinquent past: He had to pay for the book because he tossed it in the garbage…just two blocks away from the library. Good thing videogames rehabilitated him.

Robo-Tizzy | Mechanized editor from the future | Priceless

The lovely and talented Teresa Dun actually departed PTOM Towers last issue (not Eric's fault, so don't hate him), so we've set about building a robotic replacement. Thus far, Robo-Tizzy consists of a pair of straw-stuffed overalls and a balloon with a huge smile drawn on it, but her productivity just isn't what we'd hoped. If anyone has a spare HRP4C or Actroid-DER2 (Google 'em) lying around that you could send over, that would be great. Thanks.

Sunny Day Real Estate | Music | Affordable, now that the market crashed

Sunny Day Real Estate—one of Scott's favorite band names ever, and quite possibly one of his favorite bands as well. 15 years after the release of their most enduring album, Diary, the original lineup has finally reunited, which means big tours, reissues of the classic albums, and…the release of Diary as *Rock Band* DLC. No word yet on when it's coming, but Scott definitely plans to be there on day one. In the meantime, he's going to sit and listen to the old albums (and encourages you to do the same).

The Gathering Storm | Book | $29.99

Roger has a love/hate relationship with Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series. The first half dozen or so books are the next best thing to the *Lord of The Rings* trilogy, but then the series draaaaged along until the author *died* prior to finishing the 12th and "final" book. Brandon Sanderson has been brought in to finish the series, but the "last" book has now morphed into *three* books. Arrgh! Just finish it already! But regardless, Roger will be first in line to buy *The Gathering Storm* when it releases.

Midnites for Maniacs | Movies | $10

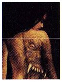
The historic Castro Theater in San Francisco is truly a sight to behold: authentic period marquee out front, awe-inspiring art deco interior, and an organ that rises out of the stage to entertain viewers during intermissions (seriously). You'd think such a well-persevered example of opulent 20th century design would be a museum by now, but for just $10, you can catch of a triple feature of long forgotten and underrated films on the first Friday of each month (approximately). Check Midnitesformaniacs.com for show listings…you might just see Scott there.

Batman: Arkham Asylum (15th anniversary) | Graphic Novel | $17.99

Who says videogames are a bad influence? Why if it weren't for the *Batman: Arkham Asylum* videogame, Carlos the Intern would never have read the *Arkham Asylum* graphic novel. Carlos enjoyed reading the book and spotting all the elements that appeared in the game. Yes, it's this confluence of interactive and traditional media that will make America a better, smarter, and more literate place. Maybe.

Where the Wild Things Are | Movie | $10

It's a month of anticipation for Roger as his favorite childhood book, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are,* prepares to make its film debut. With movies like *Adaptation* and *Being John Malkovich* in his catalog, director Spike Jonze is an eclectic pick to man the helm of *Wild Things.* Which means the film will either be inspired genius or a horrible desecration of a beloved childhood classic. No pressure, Spike...but Roger has his eyes on you.



After Dark Horrorfest 4 | Film Festival: Week of Jan 29th, 2010 | A ticket and nerves of steel

Who wouldn't want to see eight scary movies? Carlos the Intern apparently, since he's managed to miss every Horrorfest since its inception in 2006, but this time he says he's ready. Come the week of January 29, 2010, he'll join the legions of fright fans in most every major U.S. city as they head to select theaters to check out eight indie horror "films to die for." Unless, of course, Carlos wusses out *again.*

What is Bothering Carl? | Interactive Book | $9.99

Everything comes full circle, and whereas *Where the Wild Things Are* has Roger reminiscing about childhood monster stories, the interactive book *What is Bothering Carl?* might prove a more appealing alternative for next-gen kids. The charming tale of Carl the Cyclops—whose laid back attitude is disrupted by a single nuisance—is easy for kids to navigate and builds vocabulary and reading skills. It's a comforting counterbalance to Roger's five-year-old son's predilection for developing ninja assassin skills. Nervous gamer parents should check out Storyfort.com.

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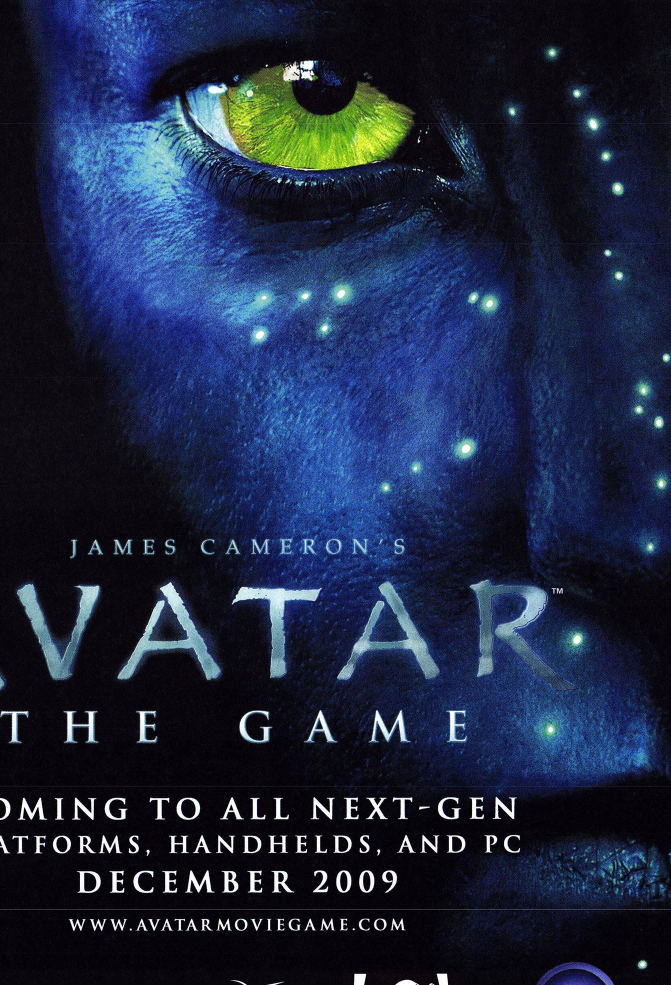

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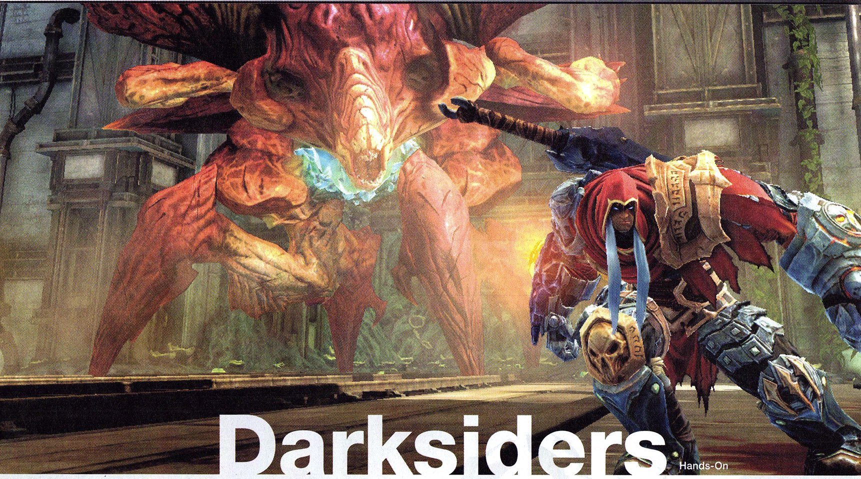


Darksiders

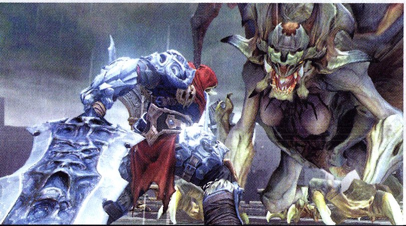
Hands-On

PS3 | **P**

Kratos' brutality. *Zelda's* open world. *Portal's* gun...this isn't just a simple *God of War* clone

PS3 AVAILABLE: January 5, 2010 GENRE: Action PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Vigil Games

▼ This bat-like boss is actually defeated using your Cross Blade to carry bombs to its ugly face, in an obvious nod to the *Zelda* series.



The apocalypse has come and gone—we're talking the actual, Biblical Apocalypse: archangels, boiling seas, demons, earthquakes and all—and the clashing armies of Heaven and Hell have done the Monster Mash all over the planet. The formerly populated human cities have been equal parts irreparably smashed, burnt to a crisp, and infected with the sinister, twisted spires of widespread, large-scale demonic architecture. And War, one of the dreaded Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, has shown up for duty only to discover that A) the whole Apocalyptic shooting match started early and is long over, B) none of his fellow horsemen seem to have punched in at all, C) he alone seems to have been set up patsy-style as the Fall Guy Who Prematurely Triggered Armageddon™, and D) he is now being hunted worldwide for same, by forces both celestial and infernal. Well, crap.

What's a guy named War to do? Hit the library for some patient, meticulous research? Not exactly. It's time to mount up, kick some ass, take some names—and write them all down in the Book of Revelation.

A War to end all Wars

Though he's still a huge, hulking, armor-clanking badass—with a gargantuan, twin-tipped sword that would give *Final Fantasy VII's* hero Cloud an inferiority complex—War starts out stripped of most of his gear and powers (punishment for supposedly causing Armageddon). He's also missing his horse Ruin entirely, though the trusty flame-hoofed steed does show up later. However, even weakened, he's adept at running, jumping, clambering along ledges and struts, interacting with devices and non-player characters—and of course, wreaking gore-soaked vengeance upon foes sent from both Heaven and Hell.

Speaking of vengeance, *Darksiders* doesn't waste any time getting you right into the sinew-cleaving

Darksiders doesn't do "little." But believe it or not, War demolishes this towering boss so brutally that we actually felt sorry for it.

action. Within minutes of starting the game, we were double-tap slashing demon foes into gibbetty ribbons, making nigh-seamless combos and executing *God of War*-style single-tap, slow-mo finishing moves on weakened opponents when the Circle-button icon appears over their doomed little heads. It's not as complex a melee system as the one in, say, *Batman: Arkham Asylum*—but it has essentially the same badass sense of satisfying, effortless fluidity.

Ditto that sense of badass when you simply snatch some annoying little flappy-winged demonic nuisance out of the air and snap its twiggy little neck. Or when you grab the face of a foe with your gauntleted fist and just sort of *squeeze,* until his head pulps in a tomato-y burst of blood and brains. We were still doing that three-and-a-half hours and dozens, maybe hundreds of fallen enemies into the game—it just *never* got old.

Funny as Hell

Believe it or not, there are a few characters in *Darksiders* who aren't hell-bent on destroying you—openly, at any rate. Early on, you meet Ulthane: a lumbering, troll-like, man-mountain of muscle and attitude with the voice and swagger of an R-rated Shrek. When battle angels invade the earthly ruins Ulthane calls home, he challenges War to a competition to see who can slaughter more "pigeons" in a set amount of time, and snarkily narrates the whole conflict. Who knew post-apocalyptia was going to be funny?

Darksiders' combat system also features an ever-filling Wrath meter, which operates rather like most games' rage meters, but with a very large, very demonic twist. When War maxes out the gauge, he can employ special moves and attacks, including temporarily morphing into a massive, winged demon flowing with molten energy. There's nothing quite like suddenly, transforming into an oversized terror composed entirely of (un)holy fire.

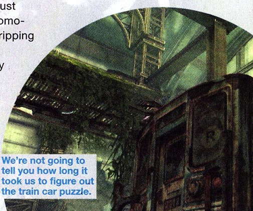
Apocalyptic Arsenal

Beyond War's gargantuan sword and massive steel gauntlets (which can smash crystalline barriers, revealing new paths and treasures) you can steal an unwieldy but immensely powerful handheld cannon named Redemption from a fallen foe and use it to mow down your feathery enemies. Then there's the Cross Blade, which acts like something flung out of *Krull* by way of the *Zelda*-series' Hyrule Kingdom. It's a four-bladed, Batarang-type monster shuriken that can strike multiple enemies in one shot, carry a payload (such as a bomb or flame) to a target, or strike and continue to grind away at a target, keeping the enemy pinned at a distance even as it chews away at their life-bar. It's fantastic.

And hey—if things get really desperate, you can always just start chucking wrecked automobiles at your opponents, or ripping lamp-posts right out of the concrete and clobbering any nearby troublemakers with them. Sure, it's not terribly elegant, but as anyone who's played a *Hulk*

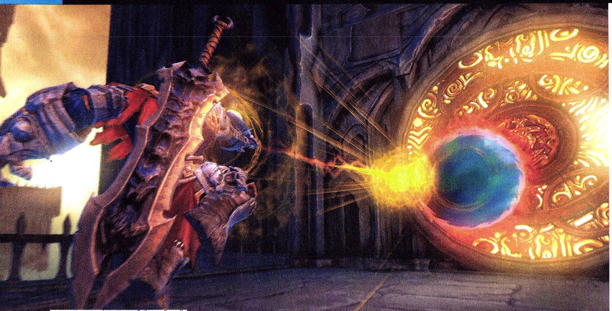
➔

"We had to hit one two-story, magma-vomiting, toad/bat/lizard-thingy's soft tummy five times... with a *train.*"

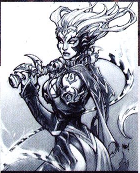


We're not going to tell you how long it took us to figure out the train car puzzle.

The massive, sand-dwelling Stygian is apparently defeatable only with a particular killing blow—one horizontal sword slash and one vertical, in the shape of the Cross.



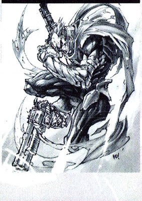
Darksiders keeps doling out new gear and abilities right to the very end. This weapon, which fires *Portal*-style teleportation holes, turns up 80-percent of the way through the game.



Four Horsemen or *more* Horsemen?

PS3 | P

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are described in Revelation, the last book of the Bible. However, only one, Death, is called by name. Scholars typically refer to the other three as War, Famine, and Conquest (sometimes Pestilence), but *Darksiders* is obviously taking some liberties here and there—guns, for instance, aren't exactly Biblical. Thus far, publisher THQ is staying silent on the other three horsemen, but check out these bits of concept art, labeled "Strife" (the man) and "Fury" (the lady with the bullwhip). Could these be War's missing co-workers?



game will tell you, there's no denying it works.

The useful Cross Blade isn't the only thing that brings to mind Nintendo's seminal *Zelda*-series. *Darksiders* has an open world, with a hub area and six main "dungeons" that you can explore in almost any order. As players are introduced to new game mechanics they'll also encounter some sprawling, distinctly (and unapologetically) *Zelda*-esque environmentally-based puzzles.

In one cavernous subway terminal filled with train-switching platforms, we got stuck trying to unclog the exit door. We were frustrated enough to punch a railcar or two—until we discovered that War can do *exactly* that, to great effect. And in more than one instance, we found the Cross Blade indispensable in transferring flame from one distant object to another, just like a certain elf's boomerang. You'll find yet another *Zelda* echo in an item called the Abyssal Chain—it's a sort of zip-line that can grapple War onto larger foes or higher perches...or drag small, unsuspecting victims toward you or into the air for some creative, juggling abuse.

Epic Proportions

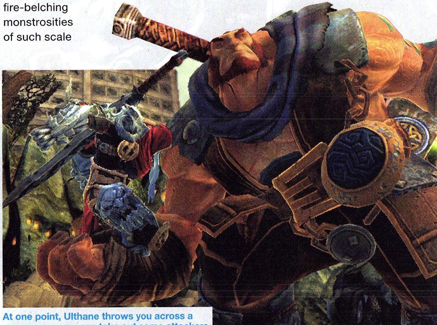
One thing that *doesn't* look like anything from another game is the art design, which springs directly from the mind of Creative Director, comic writer/artist Joe Madureira. Everything in the post-Apocalypse world is darkly beautiful, overwhelmingly detailed, and satisfyingly *chunky,* from the massive, central, demonic Tower ever looming on the horizon, down to the scaly skin of the smallest individual combatant. Even single characters and relatively minor battles in *Darksiders* are epic in their look and presentation, so you can just imagine how things get when the boss monsters start showing up.

Ironically labeled "The Chosen Ones," the big-bads in *Darksiders* are just the worst news imaginable: Building-sized, horned, membrane-winged, fire-belching monstrosities of such scale that even their vulnerable spots are a challenge. Case in point: in order to exploit one two-story, magma-vomiting, toad/bat/lizard-thingy's soft tummy, we had to hit it five or six times...with a *train.*

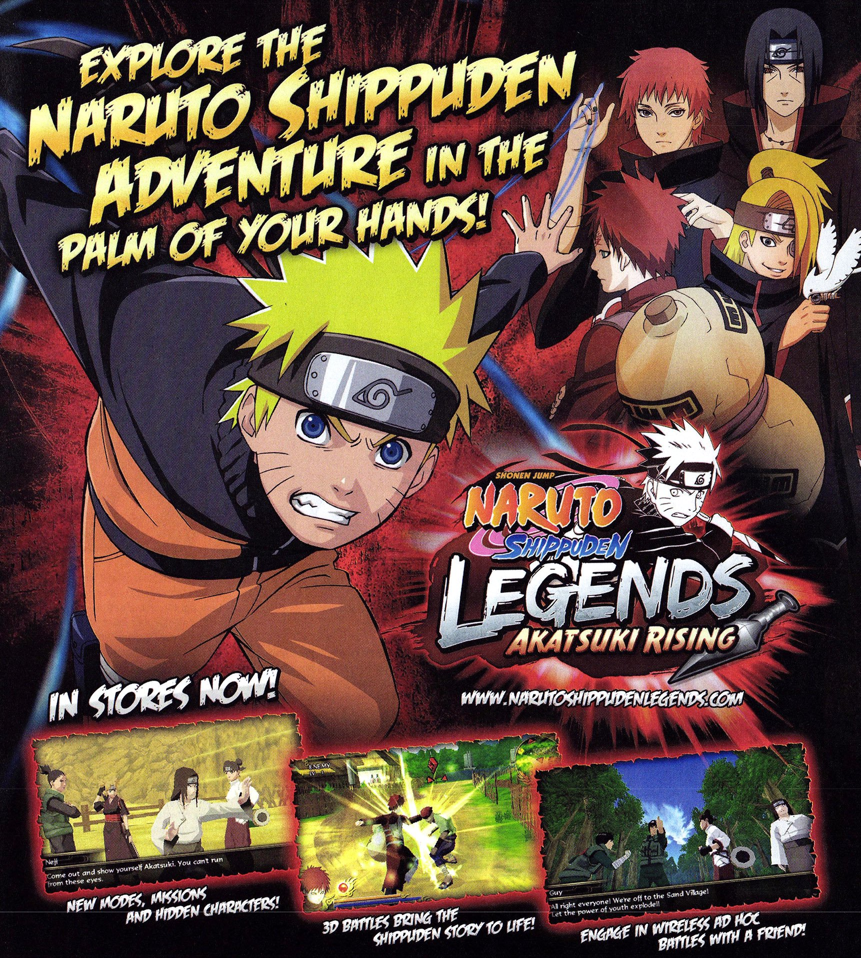
Then came the crazy moment. Our demoer took the controller and said he wanted to show us something nobody had ever seen before. What was it? A new weapon unlocked late in the game: a gun that shoots one orange hole and one blue one, which are connected. Yep. It was the *Portal* gun. In fact, it's even more robust, because you can shoot a hole and then fire through the opening it makes to place your second hole. Or, you can supercharge the holes so they'll rocket you out with added energy, as if you'd dropped in from a tremendous height.

At this point, we've seen lots of *God of War* and *Zelda,* some *Hulk,* and even some *Portal* in *Darksiders'* design. But it's important to note that *Darksiders* doesn't feel like a copycat. Why not? Because the devs are borrowing great ideas and implementing them beautifully. A good idea done well is fun even if you didn't think of it first. You'll hear no complaints from us. In fact, we can't wait for January 5th, so we can see what other game elements survived the end of the world.

Chris Hudak



At one point, Ulthane throws you across a crevasse so you can take out some attackers and lower a bridge for him. You can still hear him trash-talking the entire time, though.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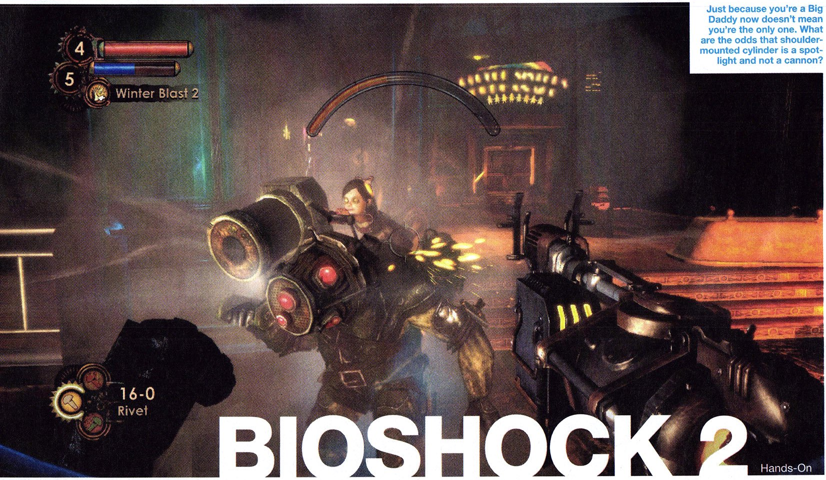


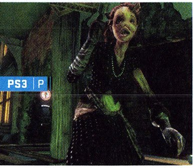
Just because you're a Big Daddy now doesn't mean you're the only one. What are the odds that shoulder-mounted cylinder is a spotlight and not a cannon?

BIOSHOCK 2

Hands-On

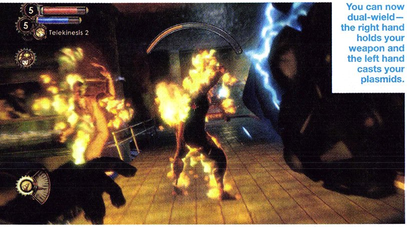
We dive deeply into the new Rapture

PS3 AVAILABLE: February 9, 2010 GENRE: First-Person Shooter PUBLISHER: 2K Games
DEVELOPER: 2K Marin, 2K Australia, Digital Extremes, and 2K China Studios



▲ After the death of plastic surgeon Dr. Steinman in the original game, Splicers got much, much uglier.

The first *BioShock* is a beloved RPG-infused first-person shooter whose unique style and flexible gameplay won millions of gamers' hearts. *BioShock 2* claims it can retain that love. How? By continuing the story, casting the player as the first game's darkly iconic cover boy—the diving suit-clad Big Daddy—and adding online multiplayer. In short, *BioShock 2* has been billed as newer, better, and more awesome. Is that possible? We grabbed a controller and diving helmet to seek out the answer.



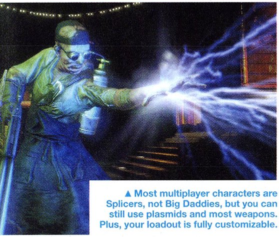
You can now dual-wield—the right hand holds your weapon and the left hand casts your plasmids.

Sugar Daddy

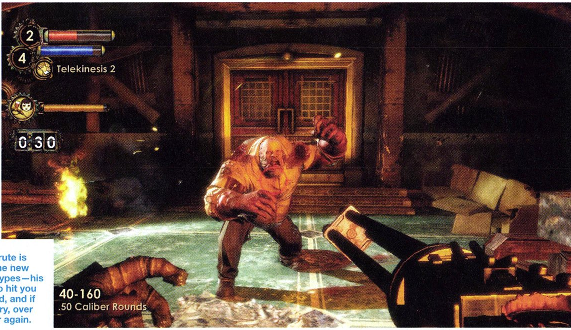
BioShock 2 takes place 10 years after the original story, and the single-player campaign puts players into the boots of the very first prototype Big Daddy. Initially, it may seem the only real differences between you and Jack, the first game's hero, are visual: you'll see through a wide glass helmet and a giant drill protrudes from your right hand. However, as one of the most dominant characters from the original game, Big Daddies are heavily equipped with brute strength, thick armor-plating, the aforementioned drill, spear guns (which, like a thumbtack to a grocery list, pin enemies to walls), and rivet guns—all of which are upgradeable. In other words, although you are a bit smaller and quicker than the production model Big Daddies (though still larger and slower than Jack), you're loaded for bear right from the get-go.

To balance your extra power, once-normal humans who've junked up on too much Adam have evolved into deadlier foes too. You'll soon encounter this new generation of enemies, the first being a big, muscular Brute Splicer. Think of him as a two-legged rhino. He charges and rams you, dealing heavy damage. 2K Marin has promised he's the first of many more undisclosed new Splicers. You'll also confront the game's new nemesis, the Big Sister, a much faster, more powerful female (but *totally* unsexy, in case you were wondering) version of yourself.

Creative Director Jordan Thomas demoed "Siren Alley," a mission that takes place in Rapture's dangerous red light district. Here, you confront the first upgraded model of Big Daddy, called the Rumbler. This defensive strategist, when attacked, quickly sets up automatic turrets around his Little Sister, hangs back, and shoots from behind his wall of fire. We also played the humorously designed propaganda mission "Journey to the Surface," which



▲ Most multiplayer characters are Splicers, not Big Daddies, but you can still use plasmids and most weapons. Plus, your loadout is fully customizable.



▶ The Brute is one of the new Splicer types—his plan is to hit you fast, hard, and if necessary, over and over again.

features a dark amusement park designed to prevent kids from ever wanting to leave Rapture. Throughout the experience, the series' trademark retro-decayed atmosphere and dynamic combat were fully intact. No drop-off there.

Multiplayer: No Scuba Gear allowed

BioShock 2's multiplayer game is all about combat. Intelligently integrated into the Rapture's storyline, the multiplayer game takes place in 1959, one full year before the events in the first *BioShock.* Interestingly, that means you'll play through modified maps taken from the first game, such as fan-favorite Fort Frolic (which we played and *loved).*

Just like the single-player campaign, the multiplayer mode rewards players with cumulative growth. The more kills and various mini-challenges you complete while playing, the more Adam you earn, which in turn unlocks more weapons, armor, upgrades, plasmids, and tonics. The challenges include things you're likely to do anyway, but provide a little extra incentive and focus, like killing a bunch of Big Daddies, hacking turrets, or taking snapshots of other players (which gives you a damage bonus against them). Smartly, the points you earn are attached to your profile, not your character, so the accumulation is perpetual.

Characters are fully customizable with party masks, rabbit ears, and hand-held weapons like candlesticks and trophies, and once you've tweaked your character's outward appearance, you'll customize three pre-set weapon/plasmid loadouts. Unlike the single-player game, multiplayer permits only two weapons, two plasmids, and three tonics at any given time. But this leads to tremendously varied strategies and character builds, and you can switch your loadout at any time to better suit the fight.

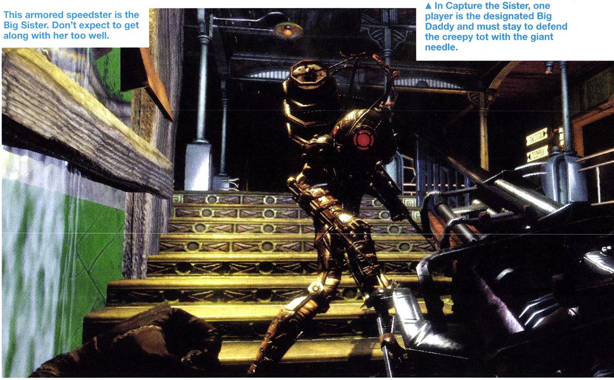
Multiplayer consists of five game modes. Survival of the Fittest and Civil War—which splits players into five-on-five teams—are basically Deathmatch modes. Capture the Sister is an interesting variation on Capture the Flag in which one team protects a little sister and the other seeks to kidnap her. Interestingly, while most modes involve Splicers, Capture the Flag spawns one defensive player as a Big Daddy, which makes sense. Turf War is basically King of the Hill, and Adam Grab is much like it sounds—a free-for-all to collect Adam rather than kills.

BioShock 2's multiplayer game is a blast. The beautiful environments retain the enclosed sense of gloom and dread from the single-player game, and the five-on-five team games create an addictive cohesiveness. We're not quite ready to say *BioShock 2* is as amazing as the first game, but we've got to admit that so far, the sequel is expanding upon the premise without sacrificing a thing. And that has us eager to put on the bubble hat and drill to get this pool party started.

Douglass C. Perry

▲ In Capture the Sister, one player is the designated Big Daddy and must stay to defend the creepy tot with the giant needle.

This armored speedster is the Big Sister. Don't expect to get along with her too well.



Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker

Hands-On

Hands-on with four naked snakes...Wait, what?

PSP AVAILABLE: 2010 GENRE: Stealth Action PUBLISHER: Konami DEVELOPER: Kojima Productions

After preventing global thermonuclear war in *Metal Gear Solid 3* and *MGS: Portable Ops,* Naked Snake is back again in *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker.* Naturally, the name is all-wrong—peace is about the last thing our one-eyed friend is going to find. Bad for him. *Great* for us.

The game begins with a quick tutorial. Snake is in Columbia training recruits for his freelance military *Militaires Sans Frontières,* (Soldiers Without Borders)—a play on the real-life organization, *Médecins Sans Frontières,* AKA Doctors Without Borders. As Snake spars with his soldiers, you learn the basic controls.

At this point, you select a control type. We chose "Shooter" type, which is similar to the controls of *Metal Gear Solid 4* on the PS3 (movement is controlled by the PSP's analog nub). The L-button shepherds the camera into a *Resident Evil 5*-style over-the-shoulder view, while the R-button fires. The camera is controlled with the face buttons. Tapping down on the D-pad will cause Snake to crouch or *hold* down to go prone, while left and right on the D-pad grant access to equipment and weapons, respectively. There's a second control layout as well, but it mimics the controls of the HUGE-in-Japan-but-ignored-here *Monster Hunter* series, so it'll be most U.S. players' second choice.

Drilling for Snake

After Snake finishes drilling his soldiers, he is informed by Kazuhira Miller (Master Miller from the first *Metal Gear Solid)* that he has a visitor. A professor from Costa Rica named Gálvez has come to ask for help. An unknown armed force has infiltrated Costa Rica, a nation without a military, and the professor seems to believe it's CIA-related. Snake's not interested.

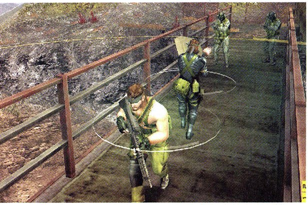
That's when Gálvez's 16-year-old student, Paz, steps in to lay on the puppy-dog eyes. She tells Snake how she was kidnapped and tortured at a young age and extols the virtues of peace and Costa Rica's pacifist constitution. Snake holds steady, but caves when it's revealed that Gálvez knows Snake is Big Boss. Time to head over to Costa Rica to investigate the mysterious militia...and also Gálvez.

PSP

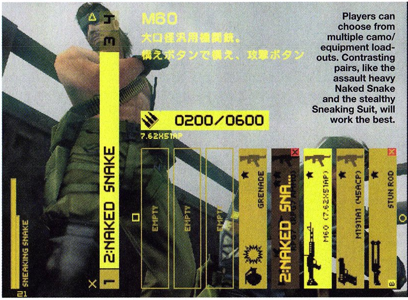
Up, Up, and Away

In *Portable Ops,* Snake could remove and capture enemy soldiers from the battlefield by slowly dragging them back to a truck. It was very inconvenient. For *Peace Walker,* Kojima Productions has added the "Fulton air recovery system." Snake simply crouches over a sleeping enemy, attaches a balloon to him, and watches him float away. The ability to remove enemies from the battlefield implies that the game will include multi-character team-building mechanics from *MPO.* However, when asked directly whether such elements would be in the game, a Kojima Productions representative said,

"Maybe, but we're not talking about that yet."



Players can share weapons. A heavily armed partner can provide a weaker, stealthier counterpart with bigger guns.



Players can choose from multiple camo/equipment loadouts. Contrasting pairs, like the assault heavy Naked Snake and the stealthy Sneaking Suit, will work the best.

Get Loaded

BATTLE DRESS
A heavily armored and loud suit. For players who want to take and deal out a lot of damage.

SNEAKING SUIT
A stealth suit combined with a riot shield. This loadout is for people who are sneaky and don't want to deal a lot of damage.

JUNGLE FATIGUES
A balanced camo set.

NAKED SNAKE
Go shirtless and crazy. This loadout is fast and has tons of weapons. For those who want to take on the enemy Rambo-style.

To a single player, *Peace Walker* feels much like a standard *Metal Gear* game: a military actioner with open environments that can be tackled through stealth or combat. For those who prefer *Metal Gear* non-lethal and sneaky, there's the ability to tranquilize enemies and sneak by them while camouflaged. For those who like to run-and-gun, there's plenty of ammo and assault rifles. New Close-Quarters Combat (CQC) options enable a mixed approach. With the ability to throw enemies into each other and consecutively combo grappling moves, it's possible to dispatch half-a-dozen enemies in seconds without firing a shot.

As fun as sneaking around alone is, the real heart of *Peace Walker* is the multiplayer mode. Every mission in our demo was playable by a single player or cooperatively as a two-to-four-man multiplayer squad. In the demo, everyone played as Snake. However, at the outset of the mission, you can choose between pre-set equipment loadouts (see sidebar) that add a bit of variety. We expect a few more characters will turn up in the final game.

> "As fun as sneaking around alone is, the real heart of *Peace Walker* is the multiplayer mode."

Co-op partners can aid each other in numerous novel ways. For example, as long as the players are within a certain distance, they can share weapons. Players must be careful not to get too far away from each other. If they do, the ability to share is cut, and they have to get right next to each other to sync up again.

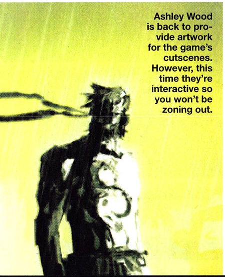
Don't press Start to skip

Cutscenes are infamously integral to the *Metal Gear* franchise, but *Peace Walker* gives you several good reasons to watch them. Some are in-engine and some are pre-rendered animatics, done in digital comic-style much like the *Metal Gear Solid* digital graphic novels. Both types are much more interactive than ever before. For example: at certain points, players will be able to scroll over the artwork in the scene and find hidden Easter Eggs. During our demo, we were able to see through the clothes of a certain female character and view her in various states of undress.

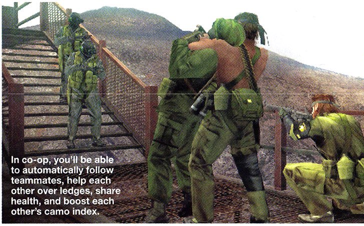
That's not *entirely* new, but there's more: In another cutscene, Snake shot down a helicopter using a missile. Even though the scene was composed entirely of artwork, the aiming and firing of the missile was completely player controlled. Even more shockingly, the codec screen we all spent so many hours staring at is *gone.* Instead, all of Snake's communication with his team is conducted in real-time.

It's clear that this is no mere portable spin-off, but we'll have to wait until 2010 too see if it's truly worthy of being considered *Metal Gear Solid 5.*

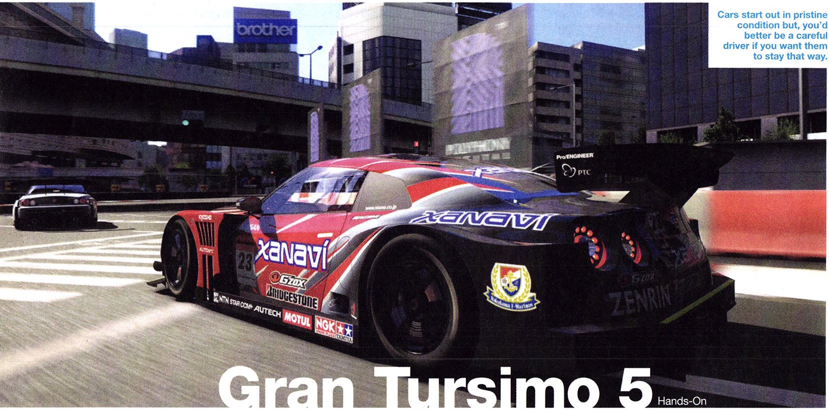
Ryan Winterhalter



Ashley Wood is back to provide artwork for the game's cutscenes. However, this time they're interactive so you won't be zoning out.



In co-op, you'll be able to automatically follow teammates, help each other over ledges, share health, and boost each other's camo index.



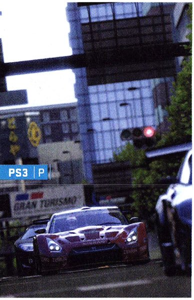
Cars start out in pristine condition but, you'd better be a careful driver if you want them to stay that way.

Gran Tursimo 5

Hands-On

Gentlemen, start your engines...

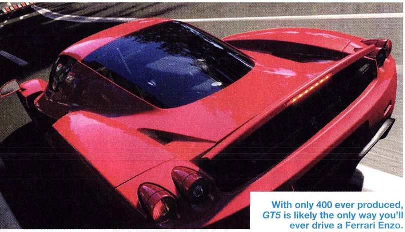
PS3 AVAILABLE: TBD 2010 GENRE: Driving PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: Polyphony Digital



▲ *Gran Turismo 5* continues the series tradition of being a graphical powerhouse.

It's hard to believe it's been four years since *Gran Turismo 4* came out on PS2. *Forza* and other hardcore racing sims have raised the bar incredibly high during the interim years, but after our hands-on time at September's Tokyo Game Show, we expect *Gran Turismo 5* will have little trouble retaining its head-of-the-pack position from the new competitors.

As expected, the game looks fantastic. The detail on each car is amazing and the game's updated cockpit view is especially pleasing to those who dislike exterior camera views. However, as good as the game looks, it's not the relative powerhouse that its predecessors were in their day, particularly the PS2's *Gran Turismo 3. GT3's* graphics were so far ahead of the competition that it took years for comparable games to be released. Well, the years have passed and the starting grid is now filled with current and forthcoming competitors like *GRID, Need for Speed SHIFT,* and *Blur,* that will give *Gran Turismo 5* a race for its money. But while the gap has closed, *GT5* still looks to have the graphical edge with its subtle but undeniably superior blend of smoothness and resolution.



With only 400 ever produced, *GT5* is likely the only way you'll ever drive a Ferrari Enzo.

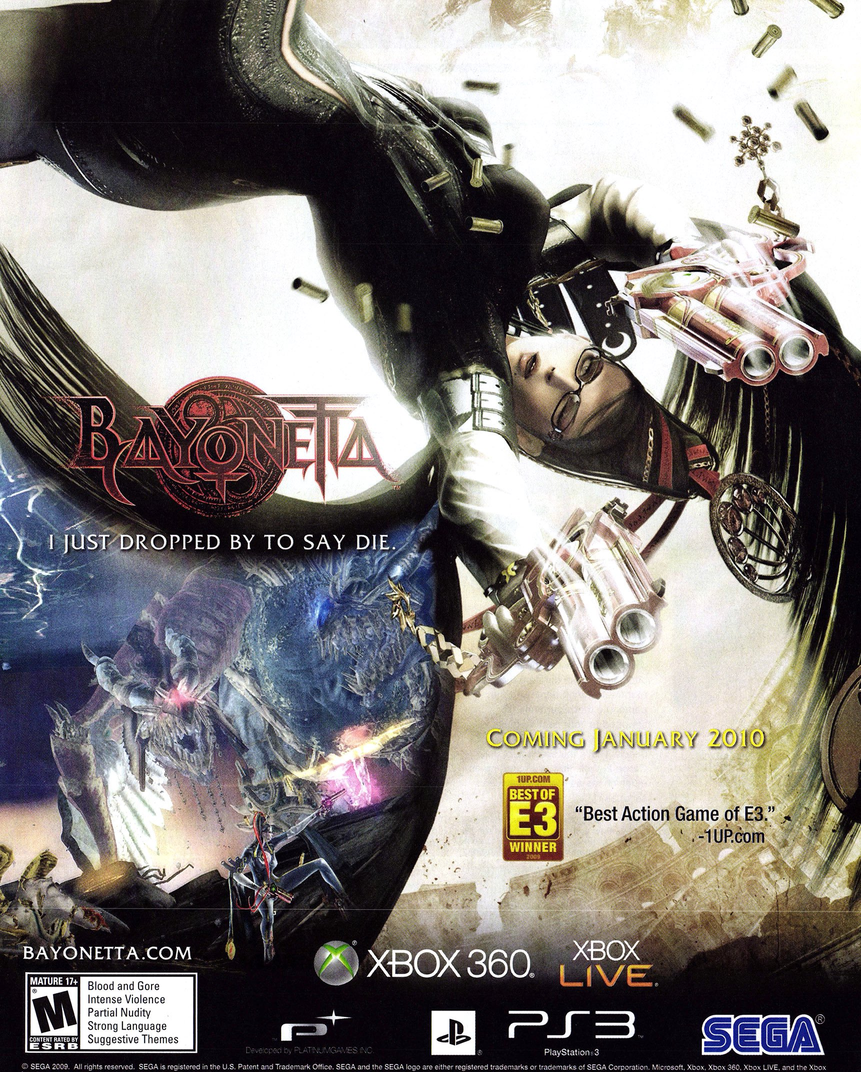
Gameplay is the proving grounds for the genre and the new game still features a level of realism and difficulty that the hardcore crowd will appreciate. If you're a longtime fan of the series or a true gearhead, you'll notice the handling of the cars themselves is actually superior to the already competent *GT5 Prologue.* It's that level of attention to finessing the precision and feel of the controls that distinguishes the *Gran Turismo* series, but at the same time, those nuances often go unnoticed by novice and casual driving game players. The one improvement that's sure to please the hardcore and novices alike is the damage modeling. No longer will players be able to drive around the track, slamming into cars and walls, and finish the race with a car looking like it just rolled off the assembly line (see sidebar).

With no release date announced for North America, it's apparent that we'll have to wait at least until March 2010 for *Gran Turismo 5.* The game has been a long time coming, but it looks like it'll be worth the wait.

Ryan Winterhalter

Fender Bender

The inclusion of damage modeling in *Gran Turismo 5* is a huge new addition to the series. But the effect as exhibited in the TGS demo can best be described as subtle. Even with some *ahem* purposefully poor driving on our part, damage was minamally reflected in the car's appearance even after several collisions. The tires became worn and the bumper jiggled a little as damage accrued, but we expected our ride to get torn up a bit more. The effect may still be in the process of being tweaked or maybe damage would have been more readily apparent if we drove more like a maniac, but it remains to be seen how much impact the feature will have on gameplay.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MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Partial Nudity
Strong Language
Suggestive Themes
Developed by PLATINUMGAMES INC.
PS3
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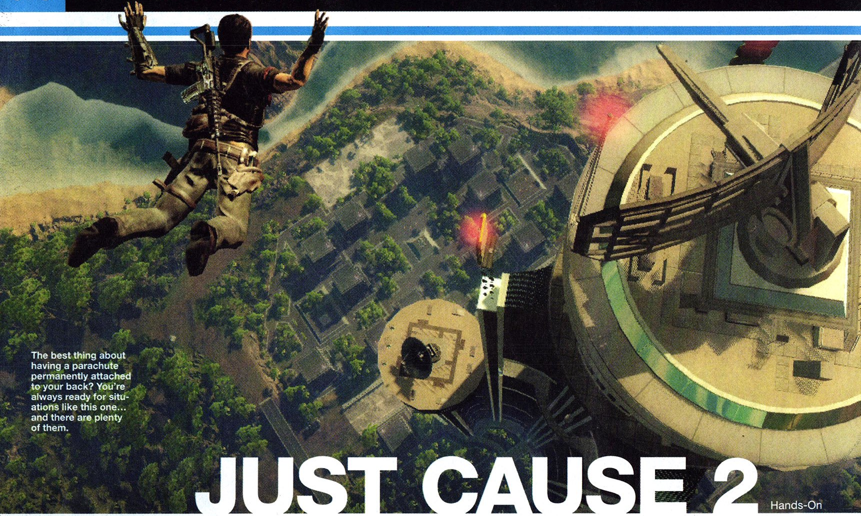


The best thing about having a parachute permanently attached to your back? You're always ready for situations like this one... and there are plenty of them.

JUST CAUSE 2

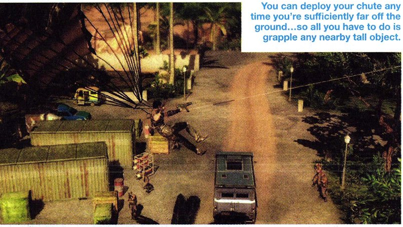
Hands-On

Laws of physics need not apply

PS3 AVAILABLE: 2010 GENRE: Action PUBLISHER: Eidos/Warner Bros. Int. Ent. DEVELOPER: Avalanche Studios

▲ Planes, helicopters, automobiles... The number of vehicle types you can commandeer in *JC2* is simply astounding.

Imagine launching a motorcycle off the bow of a ship that's wrecked on a mountain top, ditching the bike during a thousand-foot freefall, then deploying the parachute that's permanently strapped to your back to glide majestically down to a tropical beach. That's the essence of *Just Cause 2*. Well, that, and creating as much chaos as you possibly can... seriously.



You can deploy your chute any time you're sufficiently far off the ground...so all you have to do is grapple any nearby tall object.

Sure, there's a thin veneer of story trying desperately to contain the unrelenting action-movie bravado (something about locating a former mentor who's disappeared with a truckload of money and intel), but as the developers put it, "chaos is the currency for progression." In order to unlock the main story missions and advance through the game, you must literally fill a "chaos meter" by wreaking havoc in any manner you choose—from forcibly capturing enemy strongholds to performing odd jobs for any of the island's three rebel gangs to assassinating any number of pre-designated targets.

Since *JC2* is an open-world game, you can also simply choose to explore and destroy designated "chaos objects," take on race challenges to earn cash, or, if all else fails, just start blowing things up at random until the army comes to stop you. There's really no limit or pattern to the ways in which you can approach the game, and considering that Panau—the politically unstable South Pacific island where the game is set—contains 400 square miles of densely-packed terrain and more than 100 hijackable vehicles, you're going to have a hard time running out of things to blow up.

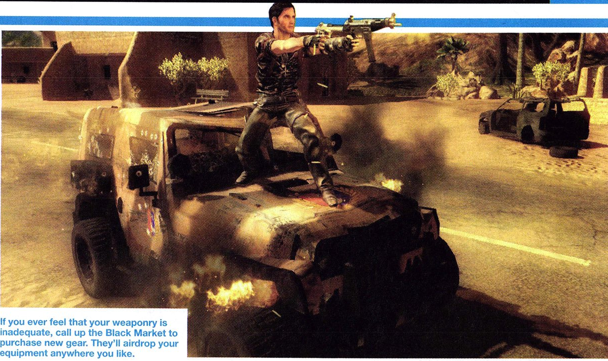
Explosions in the sky

But let's face it: you're not visiting Panau for its sun-soaked beaches and lush tropical jungles. You're here for the *action.* We recently had a chance to get our hands on *JC2,* and rest assured, our playtime saw the laws of physics defied in ways we can barely describe.

Our first mission sent us up the side of a remote mountain to a communications facility that could aid us in locating an informant. This entailed hijacking a helicopter, which—in addition to providing a convenient and responsive mode of transportation—gave us a chance to admire the game's visuals. And admire we did: the geographical diversity, realistic detail, and vast draw-distance were truly impressive.

Once we reached the base, we bailed out of the chopper mid-flight, letting it crash gloriously into an unlucky tower as we deployed our parachute and floated effortlessly over the ensuing explosion. And note that the parachute in *Just Cause 2* is far from ordinary. Using the analog sticks, you can actually lose or *gain* altitude and steer yourself wherever you like. Basically, in a limited sense, you can fly, and though it definitely requires some practice and the camera can be tricky, this becomes especially handy when used in tandem with your other major tool: the grapple.

Unlike the original *Just Cause,* the grapple is now permanently attached to your arm to be utilized at any time and can attach to absolutely anything—buildings, vehicles, people, you name it. (See the We're Hooked sidebar for a few creative uses.) When you're floating around with your parachute open, you can grapple objects in the environment (including the ground) to pull yourself around, providing momentum when needed. Both of these tools are open to you from the start of the game and are an integral part of the *JC2* experience.

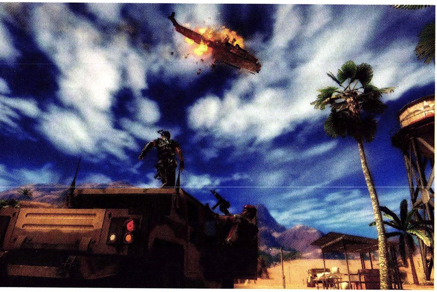


If you ever feel that your weaponry is inadequate, call up the Black Market to purchase new gear. They'll airdrop your equipment anywhere you like.

Chute to kill

After grappling and gliding around the base—occasionally dropping explosives and picking off careless enemies with our submachine gun—we hit the ground and got to work. And by "work" we mean "killing bad guys." The action is decidedly run-and-gun as enemies can sustain an impressive amount of damage before keeling over, but so can hero Rico Rodriguez—although health regeneration is limited and the more damage you sustain, the less you'll be able to recover.

More importantly, though, you can dual-wield an Uzi and a sawed-off shotgun…and fire them independently. It's amazingly fun, and the audio and visual effects—like gunfire and opponent animations—prove strong enough to make each firefight a gratifying experience. There's no auto-targeting system, but there is an "aim assist" that guides your weapons towards their targets. Needless to say, you'll do more damage if you actually place the reticule over an enemy, but the assist mechanic melds so seamlessly into gameplay that you'll just think you're an amazing shot.



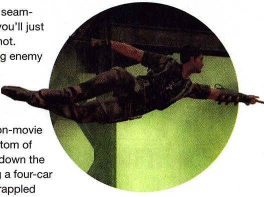
You can assume a "stunt position"—like standing on the roof of a moving car, for instance—anytime you're in a vehicle by simply hitting one of the face buttons.

Once we finished wasting enemy soldiers and actually recovered the location of the informant, a friendly chopper dropped by to take us to him. In true action-movie style, Rico clung to the bottom of the helicopter as it soared down the mountain and began tailing a four-car convoy. At this point, we grappled our way down to the last car and assumed a "stunt position." Basically, any time you're in or on a vehicle, you can hit a button to, say, ride the hood or cling to the grill or assume any number of other positions. It's all very Indiana Jones.

As the convoy continued to barrel down the road at full speed, we picked off occupants as they emerged to fire on us and grappled our way to the front car where our informant was being held captive. Then, from the roof of the car, we pulled the driver out of the vehicle, commandeered it for ourselves, and careened off into the desert to meet up with the faction that hired us.

That's *Just Cause 2:* gravity-defying parachutes, arm-mounted grappling guns, and easily executed action-movie stunts all within the context of an open-world shooter. The controls felt solid throughout and the graphics certainly impress, so if the game's other technical and design aspects hold up, this is could be one memorable experience.

Scott Butterworth



We're hooked

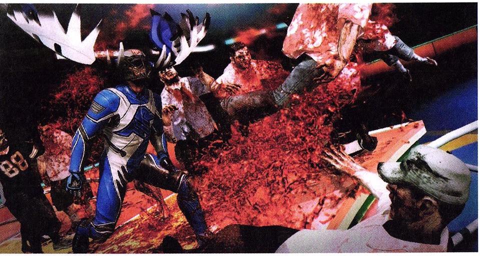
Thanks to its impossibly strong cables and incredibly generous range, *Just Cause 2's* grappling gun proves to be a very versatile little tool. If you shoot a solid object, you'll automatically be pulled towards and then attached to that object. If you *shoot* a person, that person will be pulled towards you as if you were Scorpion from *Mortal Kombat.* And if you shoot a grapple into anything at all and then continue to hold down the button while you aim at something else, the two objects will be tethered together (and if you like, you can hit the button again to release the tether). Considering all these options, there are some truly creative uses for your grapple…if you've got a cruel enough mind.

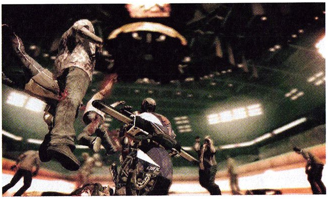
HERE ARE OUR FAVORITES SO FAR:

- Pull a guard down from a tower (simple but useful)
- Pull an enemy toward you then shoot him out of midair
- Tether an enemy to an exploding barrel…then shoot the barrel to launch him into the sky
- Tether an enemy to the rotating blade of a windmill
- Tether two helicopters together for a midair collision

PlayStation Gallery

Updates, sneak peeks, works-in-progress





Dead Rising 2 Update

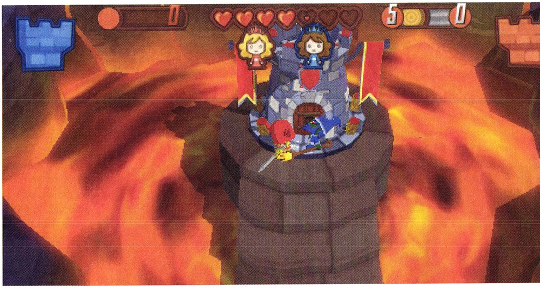
PS3 AVAILABLE: TBD 2010 GENRE: Action
PUBLISHER: Capcom DEVELOPER: Blue Castle

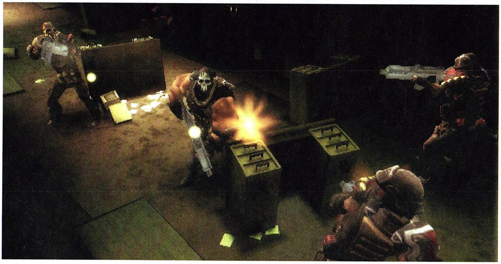
Congratulations—you're the latest contestant on the slaughter-happy game show "Terror is Reality"...otherwise known as *Dead Rising 2's* totally kickass multiplayer mode. Basically, up to three friends and you will compete to see who can kill the most zombies in a variety of gruesome ways: riding a motorcycle that has chainsaws strapped to the sides, wearing a helmet that sports a pair of razor sharp moose antlers, running around in a human-sized, zombie-crushing hamster ball...you get the idea. Sure it sounds totally ridiculous (and awesome), but bare in mind that this is just the multiplayer. The story mode—which follows former motocross champ Chuck Greene as he searches for his daughter in a zombie-infested Las Vegas-style city—promises to be significantly more serious...or at least *slightly* more serious. Scott Butterworth

Fat Princess: Fistful of Cake First Look

PSP AVAILABLE: TBD GENRE: Action
PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: SuperVillain Studios

We've got good news and bad news. The good news is that the hit PSN title *Fat Princess* is waddling over to the PSP and bringing it's frantic, twisted take on Capture the Flag with it. The bad news? Online play only supports five character classes and up to eight players, down from six classes and 32 players on the console version. But don't be too bummed! In *Fistful of Cake,* you can swap character classes at any time just by grabbing a new hat (seriously), so even though you'll always be at least one class short of the full roster, you'll always have the characters you need. Plus, there's a plethora of new content, including six new battlefields, four new multiplayer modes, and an extended, story-driven single-player campaign. So the experience may be slightly miniaturized, but the joy of whacking your opponents with weapons and cramming your princess full of cake so she'll be harder to kidnap shouldn't be diminished. Scott Butterworth

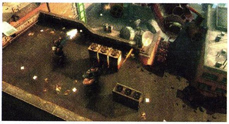


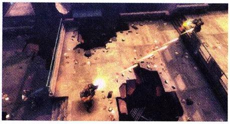


Army of Two: The 40th Day

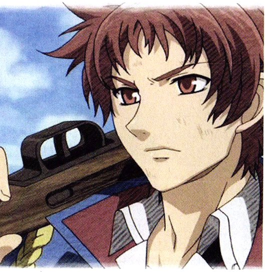
Hands-On

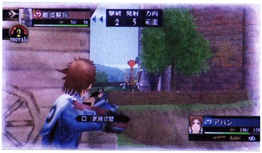
PSP AVAILABLE: January GENRE: Action
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: EA Montreal

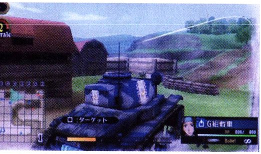




Salem and Rios are going handheld, and though the game retains the "pivotal" elements of the PS3 version—like the local co-op and the disaster-in-Shanghai storyline—it's been adapted specifically for the PSP. Basically, it's an arcadey, side-scrolling shooter set in a 3D space...though it doesn't always scroll to the side. Much like the shooter games of yore, the camera is locked in a fixed position, but its position changes as you move through the level. However, no matter where the camera sits, each of the face buttons fires your weapon in a single dedicated direction. So if you hit Triangle, you shoot towards the top of the screen, and so on. Sounds a little wacky, sure, but our hands-on time proved that even wacky ideas can be tremendously fun...with a little acclimation. Scott Butterworth







Valkyria Chronicles 2

First Look

PSP AVAILABLE: Summer 2010 GENRE: Strategy RPG
PUBLISHER: Sega DEVELOPER: Sega

Though not quite the next-gen sequel we may have been hoping for, Sega's *Valkyria Chronicles* is making its way onto the PSP as the obviously titled *Valkyria Chronicles 2.* Set in a fictional 1937 Europe, it follows a group of young students at the Lanseal Military Academy as they try to survive a civil war... and high school. The game is half strategy RPG and half high-school-life simulator. The developers have actually promised that players will have the chance to "experience every day school life." Despite the dating-sim–like mechanics of the school-life sections, the combat uses its own real-time/turn-based hybrid system to offer a ton of depth and strategic flexibility, and *Valkyria's* superb art style makes the transition to the PSP no worse for the wear. Ryan Winterhalter

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– PlayStation The Official Magazine – October 2009

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Assas

PS3 | PRICE: $59.99 | ESRB: Mature | PUBLISHER: Ubisoft | DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal

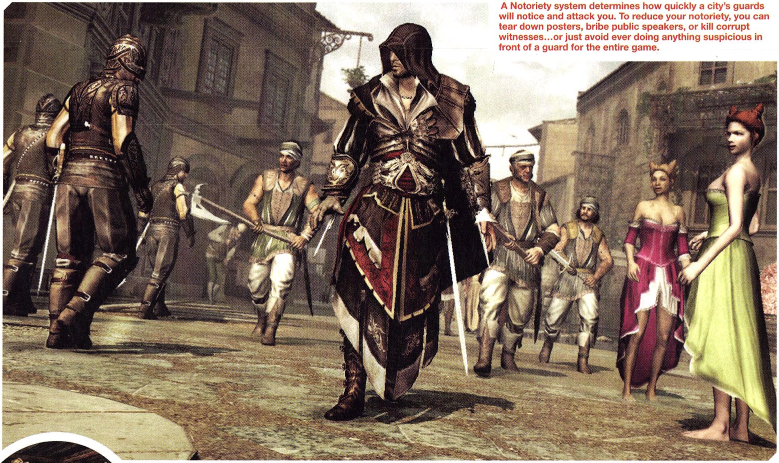
sin's Creed II

We peer beneath the assassin's cowl to discover his true face

BY SCOTT BUTTERWORTH

PlayStation
The Official Magazine
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Editors' Choice

Desmond Miles. A man with centuries of history crashing through his veins, who watches the lives of his ancestors flash before his eyes in a machine that revives dormant memories that are written into his genetic code. He watched as two-faced preachers and soulless politicians ransacked the Holy Land during the Third Crusade. He witnessed the earliest days of a secret war that rages even to the present day between two sacred orders—the Templars and the Assassins—that seek to influence the fate of the world through murder and deceit. And now he's set to experience the life of another ancestor, Ezio Auditore, an Italian nobleman determined to avenge the death of his family. From the streets of Florence to the canals of Venice (and beyond), we followed Miles on his epic journey through betrayal and retribution. And now that we've seen the past, we're ready to illuminate the present…



A Notoriety system determines how quickly a city's guards will notice and attack you. To reduce your notoriety, you can tear down posters, bribe public speakers, or kill corrupt witnesses…or just avoid ever doing anything suspicious in front of a guard for the entire game.

BLOOD TIES

Alright, so you probably know that *Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines*—a PSP title that continues to follow Altaïr after the events of first game—hits store shelves the same day as *Assassin's Creed II*, but did you know that you'll be able to synch the two games and unlock special items in both? That's right, simply load up both games, connect your PSP to your PS3 via USB cable, and select "Connectivity" from the Extras menu in *AC II*. In the PS3 game, you'll receive the weapons of the bosses you've defeated in *Bloodlines* (up to six, if you earn them all), as well as cash for every special coin you've collected. In the PSP game, you'll receive additional bars on your health meter and upgrades for your hidden blade, including the well-advertised wrist pistol and an armguard for blocking.

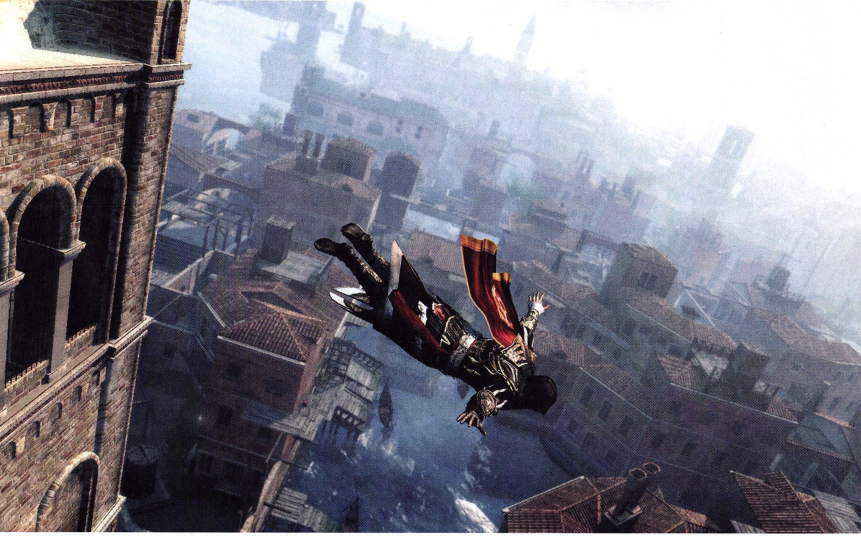
the sequel has arguably changead for the better in just about every conceivable way

Assassin's Creed II and the original *Assassin's Creed* are two remarkably different games. The sequel retains the historical roots, fluid free-running, and brutal assassinations that made the first game such a unique and refreshing (though occasionally tedious and repetitive) experience. But with an entirely new hero, setting, and gameplay focus, the whole game just *feels* different—which isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, the sequel has arguably changed for the better in just about every conceivable way, starting with the most basic element of all: the protagonist.

Altaïr Ibn La-Ahad—the arrogant, insufferable assassin with the inexplicable American accent who spent most of the Third Crusade picking off various historical figures—is out. In his place, we have Ezio Auditore da Firenze, a brash, occasionally overconfident, yet charming and sincere Italian aristocrat who's immediately more likable than his ancestor. Naturally, mild-mannered bartender Desmond Miles returns, but following a somewhat clumsy (albeit necessary) opening-gameplay segment that picks up immediately after the last game's cliffhanger "ending," you'll actually spend almost no time in the present day (yeah, we were relieved too).

Instead, you'll enjoy marathon sessions in the Animus reliving Ezio's charmed life in 15th century Florence amid all the wonder and drama of the Italian Renaissance—a truly inspired and captivating setting that no other game has even attempted…although it doesn't actually work out too well for Ezio. Very early in the game, his father and brothers are betrayed by a family friend and hanged by a judge who's guilty of the very crime for which Ezio's family is executed.

Being severely allergic to injustice and familial genocide, Ezio decides to don his father's assassin's robe and do what any good videogame badass does in this situation: get even. Of course, when he discovers that his father was murdered in service of a much larger conspiracy, he's left with quite a lot of "getting even" to do.



▲ **Just like the first game, you climb to the top of the city's highest points in order to "synch" with the map and reveal new items and locations. And after enjoying the view for a while, you can go ahead and dive off.**

Fortunately for Ezio, *Assassin's Creed II* sports an impressive collection of helpful side characters, including several that you *don't* kill: Paola, the head mistress of a popular brothel who teaches you the art of deception; your uncle Mario, who trains you in armed combat; Leonardo da Vinci (at least a slick, young version of him), who serves as your support crew throughout the game. None of the characters leave a truly lasting impression (except maybe da Vinci, who's a real pal), but it's refreshing to interact with each new personality as they pass through Ezio's life and subtly drive the story forward, especially since the voice acting is top notch all around. Plus, meeting famous historical figures like the Medicis and participating in real historical events is just plain cool.

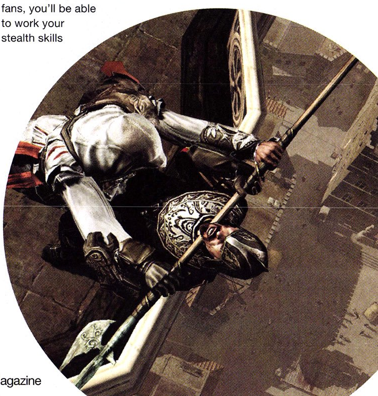
Perhaps the only drawback of this whole elaborate setup is that fact that Ezio is not an assassin from the beginning of the game. In fact, it took us nearly four hours just to get a sword. To be fair, *AC II* is a seriously long game, so in a relative sense, four hours actually isn't that much time, but we couldn't help but feel a little frustrated by this very deliberate pacing, even if it is in service of the story.

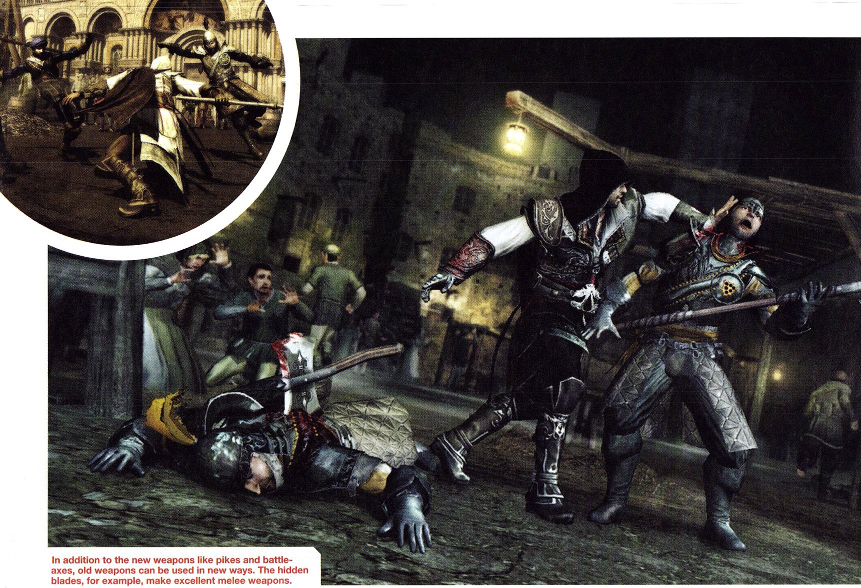
Still, once the story actually starts to pick up steam, it never looks back, and the strong characters and compelling setting guide you through a deep, involving adventure that winds throughout Italy, stopping every now and then for a massive "Holy crap!" moment. Even the ending—which takes a serious turn for the bizarre and unapologetically announces another sequel—proves far more satisfying than the painfully abrupt finale of the first game.

MAN ON A MISSION

But most importantly, the narrative actually drives the events of the game this time. Sounds obvious, sure, but it means you'll kill men for atrocities you've actually witnessed (or at least heard them admit to committing), rather than crossing off anonymous names on a list your boss gave you, as it worked in the last game. From surreptitiously scaling a series of towers to storming a fortress with an army of mercenaries, you encounter each assassination target under a unique set of circumstances that emerge organically from the preceding events. This certainly adds some welcome variety, but it also means many of these assassinations aren't really assassinations anymore: no stalking your prey, no creeping in for a quick, clean kill. Instead, the killings tend to be more violent and action-oriented.

Don't worry, Solid Snake fans, you'll be able to work your stealth skills



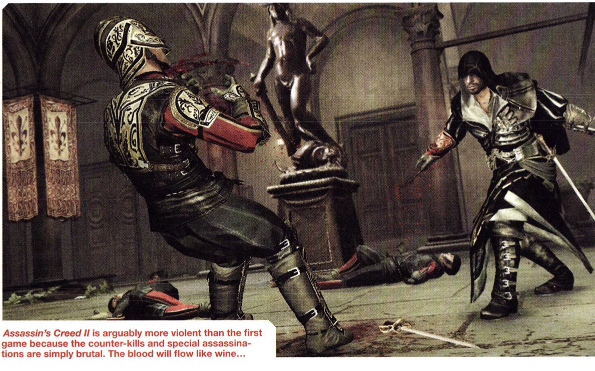


In addition to the new weapons like pikes and battle-axes, old weapons can be used in new ways. The hidden blades, for example, make excellent melee weapons.

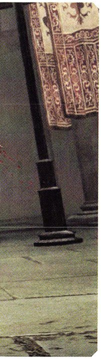
the Italian Renaissance—a truly inspired and captivating setting that no other game has even attempted

into certain scenarios throughout the game; the stealth elements haven't been eliminated entirely, the focus has merely shifted…mainly to kicking ass, assassin-style. But this new approach does mean that the information gathering missions of the original game no longer make sense. You're not really going to need to track your target if you're watching him violently murder a nobleman in front of a church, right? Instead, *AC II* adopts a mission system very similar to that of *Grand Theft Auto:* as you play, new side-missions that you can access at any time will appear throughout the city, and most missions are straight to the point and directly advance the storyline.

In Venice, for instance, you spend one mission aiding an ally who's injured during a raid on an unfriendly base. First, you must fend off hordes of enemy soldier as she limps through the streets and then you have to



Assassin's Creed II is arguably more violent than the first game because the counter-kills and special assassinations are simply brutal. The blood will flow like wine…



protect her gondola from archers as another ally rows her to safety. Though the underlying objectives are typically simple—in this case, "kill these dudes and don't let your friend die"—the fact that each mission serves a unique purpose within the context of the story keeps everything feeling fresh.

You'll notice a few repeating mission types (following a conspirator without being noticed or collecting people or items from three different locations are popular choices), but even these never grow repetitive enough to be grating. Plus, you occasionally do something totally different and crazy...like soar over Venice using da Vinci's makeshift flying contraption.

GOING MEDIEVAL

Much like the mission system, *AC II's* reworked fighting mechanics focus on eliminating the oft-maligned repetitiveness of the first game's combat. No, it's not suddenly *God of War*—the combat definitely still has its own unique rhythm—but you're presented with a slew of fresh options including a huge arsenal of new weapons. If you want to simply hammer on the attack button and watch your enemies kneel before your might, you can carry a battle-axe or war hammer as your primary weapon, both of which tend to deal impressive damage even when your enemies are blocking.

If you're a little more patient like us, though, you can stick with a sword and rely on the new, deeper counterattack system: hold block until your opponent makes a move, then time your attack to deal a devastating, cinematic execution. And if you pull the same trick while unarmed, you can actually disarm the enemy and then dispatch him with his own blade. Discovering each brutal new execution is (for some sick reason) fantastically fun, and thankfully, each weapon has several different kill animations built in, so it'll take a while to see them all. Plus, you can pick up and temporarily use any weapon lying around the battlefield, and more importantly, you can purchase entirely new weapons.

As with most in-game economies, you now earn money by completing missions, looting the dead, scouring the map for hidden chests, and, eventually, improving your "safe house," which is actually your uncle's swanky villa in the countryside. You can use that cash to purchase the new and upgraded weapons that you gradually unlock, or to buy armor, which is the primary method of permanently increasing your health bar. You can also buy medicine from doctors, pay to have your clothes dyed at a tailor, or purchase art to improve the value of your safe house.

It may not sound like a big deal, but the economic system is impressively well balanced; you never have enough cash for the system to feel meaningless, but you're never forced to scrape together loose change either. And upgrading your gear is an immensely satisfying process. We can't explain it, but there's just something about unlocking a shiny new sword that makes us feel all warm and fuzzy.

And new weapons aren't just satisfying—they're *useful.* Because in addition to the array of new weapon types, there are new enemy types to face: Brutes, as the name implies, are massive, heavily armored soldiers who are slow but incredibly powerful, and Seekers, by contrast, are lightly armored but fast enough to keep up with Ezio...even if he runs. In both cases, standard tactics just won't cut it and you'll be forced to explore new avenues of destruction: dodges, disarms, special attacks...whatever works. Even run of the mill soldiers wielding more usual weapons—like long spears or large, two-handed swords—must be dealt with in new, creative ways, which always helps to keep combat feeling fresh, exciting, and, most importantly, *fun.*

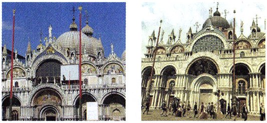
ON THE RUN

Of course, if you don't feel like fighting, *AC II* has also added a bunch of options that help you avoid direct conflict. Our favorite? The three new stealth assassination techniques: while in a hiding spot (like a bail of

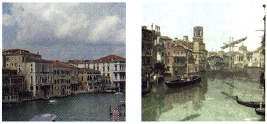
PICTURE PERFECT?

The cities of *Assassin's Creed II* are masterpieces unto themselves. Each one is dense, detailed, and completely open for exploration. The game isn't quite as visually polished as the original—observing a city from atop a "viewpoint" (any of a number of specific high points peppered throughout each city) generally reveals a little white fog rather than an immaculate draw distance, for example—but the cities are absolutely remarkable nonetheless, in part because they've been so carefully modeled after their actual, real-life counterparts. So how successful was the development team in recreating some of Italy's most famous landmarks? You be the judge.

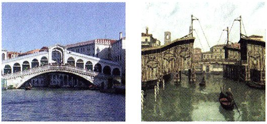
SAINT MARK'S BASILICA



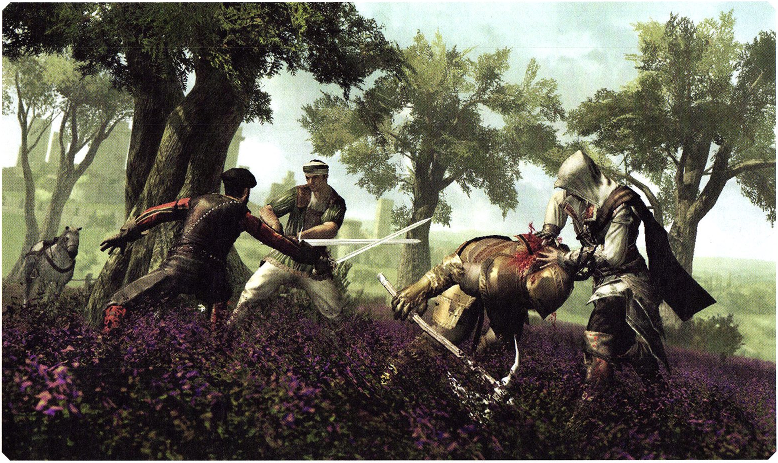
THE GRAND CANAL



THE RIALTO BRIDGE



▼ **When you manage to ditch your pursuers, they'll continue to investigate the area surrounding your last known location. Of course, if they check your hiding spot, you can just pull them in for a quick kill.**



▲ Though there's often not much there, you'll have plenty of countryside to explore. Enjoy the fresh air as you slaughter a few enemies with a hired mercenary.

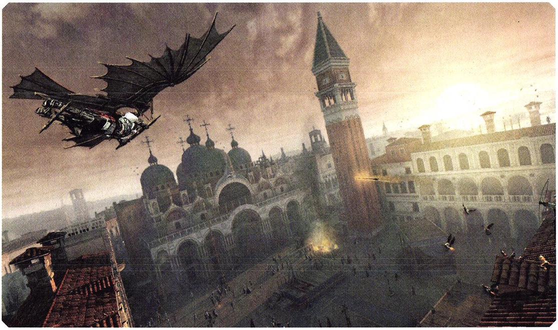
hay), grab an enemy and quickly pull him to his doom; while positioned above an enemy, lock-on for an easy one-button flying kill; or while hanging from a ledge, grab an enemy standing above you and hurl him to his death. Gruesome as it may sound, we could spend the entire game just running around the city throwing people from ledges and diving on them from above. It's just awesome.

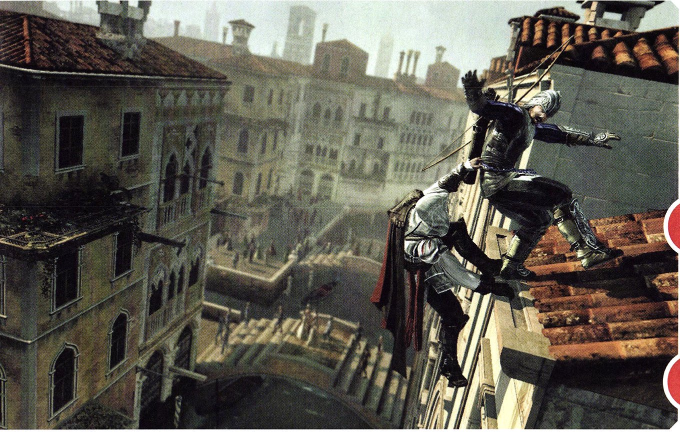
you can actually disarm the enemy and then dispatch him with his own blade

Not all of Ezio's new moves are equally flashy, but some of them are just as useful: you can now blend into any crowd to avoid detection, or hire a group of courtesans, thieves, or mercenaries to distract, defend, or attack for you. You can also throw money to attract a crowd of peasants and slip past your enemies in the ensuing chaos. You can even do the same thing with a dead body…though that's a little more disturbing. And should you ever get caught, you can throw a smoke bomb and do what Ezio does best: run.

Free-running really is the trademark of the *Assassin's Creed* games, and for good reason. Sprinting across rooftops, scaling immense towers, and traversing whole cities at will is an incredibly liberating feeling (even if you're just holding a couple buttons and allowing Ezio to do most of the work for you), and the fluid, natural animations are absolute works of art. No other game even comes close to this level of freedom of motion. And Ezio, it turns out, is an even better runner than his ancestor Altaïr. Not only can he can climb faster, he generally does a better job of finding places to pull himself up to—even if they aren't directly above him. Also, should you ever slip, simply press the Circle button when you're near a grabbable object to avoid a painful fall. And fortunately for all of us, the camera and the controls are generally very cooperative. We still

▼ Most missions involve fairly standard objectives like protecting an ally or retrieving an item. But every once in a while…





▲ Throwing guards into the canals of Venice absolutely never gets old. The splash sound effect is hilarious.

unintentionally hurled ourselves off a building a few times...but we're almost positive it was our fault.

The cities—in addition to being absolutely gorgeous and in most cases, larger than those in the first game—serve as amazingly well-designed playgrounds for your free-running. Each one features a unique architectural fingerprint and possesses a distinct atmosphere and personality that helps immerse you even deeper in the story. San Gimignano in the Tuscan country, for instance, is incredibly dense and mixes many of the game's shortest buildings with several of its tallest, whereas the structures in Venice are relatively tall, making quick escapes a bit more tricky…unless you dive into the canals. *AC II's* environments directly influence gameplay in surprising and delightful ways, making the its free-running more rewarding than ever.

LAST WORDS

Assassin's Creed II truly offers an experience like no other, one that mixes history and brutality to sheer perfection. And it's absolutely massive: it took us nearly 40 hours to make it through and we didn't even finish every optional mission—of which there are plenty (check out the sidebar). With the added combat variety, mission structure, in-game economy, and lengthy narrative, it's easy to feel a bit overwhelmed, but beneath the shiny new exterior, all the basic elements of an immensely compelling title are there: You still get to free-run through picturesque European cities. You still get to cross swords with unsuspecting guards. And you still get to sneakily assassinate famous historical figures. The game builds on all of these essential ingredients to smartly address every complaint raised against the first game and create an experience that feels not only deep but satisfyingly complete. It may not be the PS3's new savior, but it easily earns your $60. Plus, you get *two* hidden blades this time. How do you argue with that?

★★★★★

ON THE SIDE

Assassin's Creed II's main story campaign is long, deep, and absolutely packed with things to do—and then there are the optional missions. And suddenly, the game seems like it's expanding into RPG territory. With so much to do, it can be tough to keep everything straight, so we've compiled a list of all the extra activities.

FEATHERS: These tiny collectibles are essentially *AC II's* version of the original game's flags. However, unlike the flags, there are only 100 and you'll actually be rewarded for gathering them.

CODEX PAGES: These pages are basically collectibles as well, but they play a far more important role in the game. You must earn or find a few select codex pages in specific ways; these pages will either grant you a new weapon or contribute to the story. The majority, however, are simply scattered throughout the world. Check your map to find them, and once you pick them up, be sure to read them in the Database menu screen for some intriguing backstory.

SIDE-MISSIONS: Think of these missions as the Taxi or Vigilante missions in *Grand Theft Auto.* They're not related to the story, but they can be entertaining and will earn you a bit of cash. Mission types include races, assassinations, courier assignments, and "beat-ups."

GLYPHS: The Glyphs are practically a game unto themselves. You must locate strange symbols (the Glyphs) on specifically marked buildings in the world. Each symbol hides a new puzzle. Once you solve the puzzle, you'll receive a short video clip in a section of the Database ominously titled "The Truth." And the best part? All the puzzles hint at some deep, all-encompassing conspiracy.

SECRET LOCATIONS: These locations aren't related to the main story, but conquering all six will earn you a snazzy suit of armor. Plus, they're damn creative and fun. Essentially the goal of the locations is to get from point A to point B through a series of platforming-based puzzles, though each one has a slightly different take on the formula. The story campaign will lead you to the first one, but check your map for the other five.

12

DAYS OF JOY

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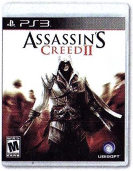
12 Must-have PS3 Games

The latest and the greatest: Our picks for the hottest Holiday titles and 2009's top-rated games

Holiday Hotties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UBISOFT

Assassin's Creed II
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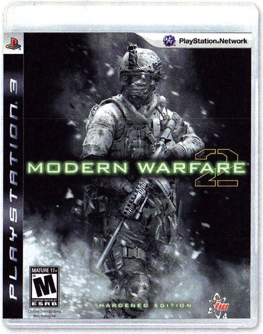
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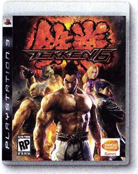
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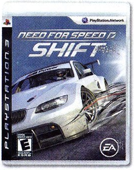
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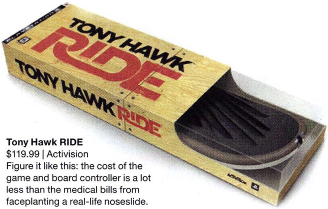
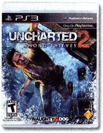
$59.99 | Electronic Arts
SHIFT vies for the driving-genre lead with high-speed racing action and jarring crashes you'll swear you *feel.*

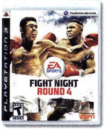

TONY HAWK RIDE
TONY HAWK RIDE
ACTIVISION

Tony Hawk RIDE
$119.99 | Activision
Figure it like this: the cost of the game and board controller is a lot less than the medical bills from faceplanting a real-life noseslide.

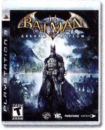
PTOM Editor's Choice ★★★★★


PS3
UNCHARTED 2
AMONG THIEVES

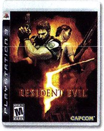
Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
$59.99 | SCEA
Cliffhanging, treasure-hunting adventure at its finest—this year's best PS3 exclusive game.


FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 4

Fight Night Round 4
$59.99 | EA Sports
Don't believe what your mom told you—the best way to settle disputes is with your fists.


BATMAN
ARKHAM ASYLUM

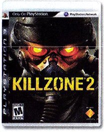
Batman: Arkham Asylum
$59.99 | Eidos/Warner Bros. Int. Ent.
This superbly crafted superhero action adventure finally does justice to the Dark Knight.


RESIDENT EVIL
CAPCOM

Resident Evil 5
$59.99 | Capcom
It skews more towards survival than horror now, but offers incredible co-op play.

STREET FIGHTER IV

Street Fighter IV
$59.99 | Capcom
The classic 2D fighter battles on unscathed in 3D with all the franchise's signature moves.

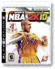


Killzone 2
$59.99 | SCEA
The best sci-fi shooter on PS3 can pick off a *Halo* game from a thousand yards away.

Play Ball

Score with this season's best Sports games

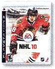
Madden NFL 10
$59.99 | EA Sports
Are you ready for some football?



NBA 2K10
$59.99 | 2K Sports
A slam dunk for ballers

MLB 09: The Show
$39.99 | SCEA
Chicks dig the long ball

FIFA Soccer 10
$59.99 | EA Sports
The beautiful game done beautifully



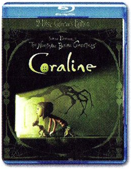
NHL 10
$59.99 | EA Sports
The fastest videogame on ice

11 Essential Blu-rays

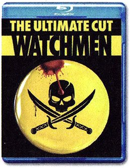
The best Blu-ray bets from TV and cinema for your PS3

MIRAMAX
THE ULTIMATE FORCE OF FOUR
A COLLECTION OF FOUR CLASSICS FROM THE MASTERS
THE LEGEND OF DRUNKEN MASTER
HERO
IRON MONKEY
THE BLIND SWORDSMAN ZATOICHI

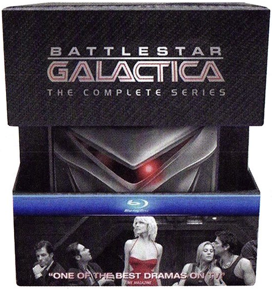
The Ultimate Force of Four Collection
$109.99 | Rated: R
Hero, The Legend of Drunken Master, The Blind Swordsman: Zatoichi, and *Iron Monkey?* A martial arts extravaganza.


2-Disc Collector's Edition
Coraline

Coraline
$39.98 | Rated: PG
Neil Gaiman's offbeat, often-creepy take on *Alice in Wonderland* is mesmerizingly brought to live in gorgeous stop-motion animation.


THE ULTIMATE CUT
WATCHMEN

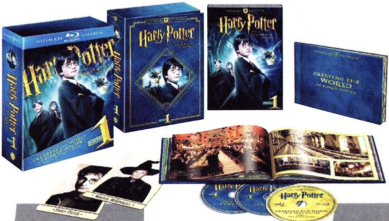
Watchmen: The Ultimate Cut
$59.99 | Rated: R
The perfect gift for the comic fan, *The Ultimate Cut* adds the *Tales of the Black Freighter* animation into the director's cut. The complete motion comic is included too.


BATTLESTAR GALACTICA
THE COMPLETE SERIES
"ONE OF THE BEST DRAMAS ON TV"

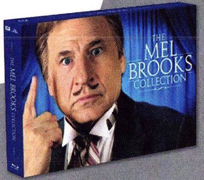
Battlestar Galactica: The Complete Series
$349.98 | Rated: NR
For the sci-fi addict, this expansive box set covers the entire *BSG* saga in beautiful detail. You'll be hard pressed to find a more impressive and comprehensive collection.

"AN ABSOLUTE BLAST!" – George Romero Director Dawn of the Dead
SHAUN OF THE DEAD
A SMASH HIT ROMANTIC COMEDY. WITH ZOMBIES.
THE PERFECT HI-DEF MOVIE EXPERIENCE
ULTIMATE EDITION
HOT FUZZ
SIMON PEGG NICK FROST

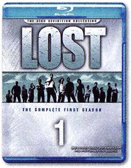
Shaun of the Dead / Hot Fuzz: Ultimate Edition
$29.99 *(Shaun)*; $26.99 *(Hot Fuzz)* | Rated: R
Universal took their time releasing Simon Pegg's two gems, *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz,* but a hefty helping of extras and fine transfers made it worth the wait.


Harry Potter
CREATING THE WORLD

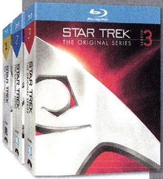
Harry Potter Ultimate Editions
$49.99 (each) | Rated: PG-13
The first two *Harry Potter* films (and eventually, all) get the deluxe treatment. Includes theatrical and extended cuts, five hours of new features, and a documentary that will span all the Ultimate editions.


THE MEL BROOKS COLLECTION

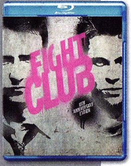
The Mel Brooks Collection
$139.99 | Rated: PG-R
Nine classics: *Space Balls, Young Frankenstein, Blazing Saddles, High Anxiety, History of the World Part 1, Robin Hood Men in Tights, Silent Movie, To Be or Not To Be,* and *The Twelve Chairs.* For the especially good kids on your list.


LOST
THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON
1

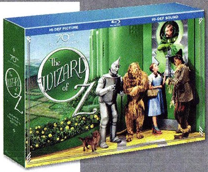
Lost: The Complete Seasons 1-5
$359.99 | Rated: NR
Bewildering, addictive, and seemingly never ending, *Lost* is a series that you'll re-watch again and again.


STAR TREK THE ORIGINAL SERIES 3

Star Trek The Original Series: Seasons 1-3
$129.99 (each); $340.99 (3 pack) | Rated: NR
The episodes look fantastic, the revamped effects are great, and the extras are first rate. An easy pick for Trekkies on your list.


FIGHT CLUB
10th ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Fight Club: 10th Anniversary Edition
$34.99 | Rated: R
Ten years later, *Fight Club* retains its powerful societal commentary and looks better than ever on your PS3.

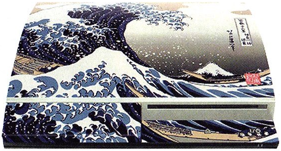

The Wizard of Oz
70th

The Wizard of Oz: 70th Anniversary Ultimate Collector's Edition
$84.99 | Rated: G
This gorgeous box set is limited, numbered, and filled with an insane amount of extras.

10 Prime PS3 Peripherals

Accessories that enhance the PS3 experience

Mad Catz Modern Warfare 2 Wireless Combat Controller
$49.99 | www.madcatz.com
The Combat edge: the two programmable buttons on the underside of the unit so your thumbs never need to venture away from the analog sticks.

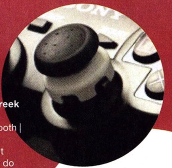


WaSaBi Irodori Decoration Skins
$23.99 | www.my-wasabi.com
There are tons of skins available for PlayStation systems, but few are as tasteful and beautiful as WaSaBi's offerings.

Turtle Beach Ear Force P21
$79.95 | www.turtlebeach.com
The P21 headset's audio amplification let's the gamer hear every nuance of a game while also communicating (talking trash) through voice chat.

MIMOBOT Designer USB Flash Drives
Starting at $24.95 (2GB) | www.mimoco.com
Transfer files and backup game saves with these incredibly stylish flash drives. We'll opt for the *Star Wars* series, but other cool designs abound.

Sony DualShock 3
$54.99 | www.us.playstation.com
Who *doesn't* need an extra DualShock 3 controller or two or three? Now available in three new colors: red, blue, and silver.



► KontrolFreek FPSFreek and SpeedFreek
$9.99 each; $17.99 for both | www.kontrolfreek.com
We admit they look a bit goofy, but they actually do improve the precision of analog-stick control inputs for FPS and driving games.

Hori Real Arcade Pro.3 ►
$99.99 | www.hori.jp/us/
Hori's top fight controller is a quality piece and sports a Sanwa-sourced stick, but trades full arcade-level components for a less serious price point.

► Sony PlayStation 3 Blu-ray Remote Control
$24.99 | www.us.playstation.com
A must-have for movie buffs, the Bluetooth-enabled Blu-ray remote works seamlessly with the PS3 and simplifies access to its disc controls.

▲ Energizer Power & Play Charging System
$29.99 | www.pdp.com
The Energizer charger's form and function is the best we've come across. If needed, two built-in USB ports allow you to charge a total of four controllers.

Mad Catz Street Fighter IV Round 2 Arcade FightStick: Tournament Edition
$159.99 | www.madcatz.com
A perfect gift for the hardcore gamer, this premium stick features arcade-quality components sourced directly from Japanese manufacturer Sanwa Denshi.

9 Ace PSP Accessories

Everything that's needed for the system on the go

► **Klipsch S4 In-ear Headphones**
$79.95 | www.klipsch.com
While not exactly inexpensive, the Klipsch S4 is perfect for PSP owners seeking premium sound quality, superior noise-cancellation, and thumping bass.

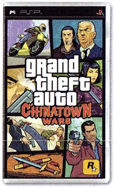
► **PSPgo Cradle**
$99.99 | www.us.playstation.com
The convenient solution for charging the PSPgo and syncing content with a PC. The Cradle can also output PSPgo video to a TV with an optional AV cable.

▲ **Limited Edition Gran Turismo PSP Entertainment Pack**
$199.99 | www.us.playstation.com
This Entertainment Pack isn't really an "accessory," but it comes packed with extras like music and movie vouchers, 2GB Memory Stick PRO Duo, and an exclusive car download. Oh… PSP-3000 and *Gran Turismo* game included.

▼ **Protective Screen Film**
$9.99 | www.us.playstation.com
Nothing sucks more than getting a brand new PSPgo or PSP and scratching the screen. Screen film is the cheapest insurance policy you'll ever buy.

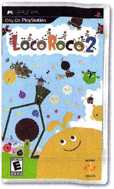
8 PSP Games to Go

Downloaded or on UMD, these are the games you want when you hit the road



GTA: Chinatown Wars
$39.99 | Rockstar Games
Is all the Holiday cheer seriously annoying you Scrooges out there? A bit of *GTA*-style murder and mayhem will get you into the spirit of the season.

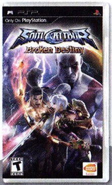
Gran Turismo
$39.99 | SCEA
Parking for 800 cars is usually a nightmare, but not for the PSP. The real driving simulator returns as a compact, but with all its horsepower intact.



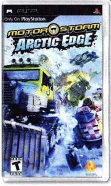
LocoRoco 2
$19.99 | SCEA
Best described as an action puzzler, the point of the game is to help the LocoRoco bring life and music back to the planet. Deceptively addictive.

G.I. JOE PSP System Case
$17.99 | www.pdp.com
For a product aimed at G.I. JOE fanboys and kids, this case is surprisingly understated—which makes it stylish option for any PSP owner.

Beats Solo Headphones
$179.95 | www.beatsbydre.com
Ear buds not your thing? Monster and Dr. Dre have teamed to produce the optimum blend of sound quality and portability. And they just look *so* sweet.

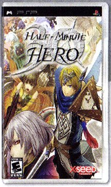


Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny
$39.99 | Namco Bandai
Broken Destiny comes with everything you expect from a *Soulcalibur* game, which instantly makes it the best fighting game available for your PSP.



MotorStorm: Arctic Edge
$39.99 | SCEA
Looking for over-the-top off-road racing action? *Arctic Edge* delivers all the thrills the *MotorStorm*-series is known for, plus snow.

PSPgo Traveler Case
$19.99 | www.us.playstation.com
Does that PSPgo frequently get tossed in a bag or backpack? The Traveler case ensures protection and it even converts to a stand for movie viewing.

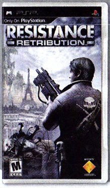


Half-Minute Hero
$29.99 | XSeed Games
Old-school RPG meets frenetic beat-the-clock gameplay. The result? An unusually fun and innovative take on RPGs for the PSP.

Just Memory(s)

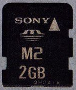
Everybody needs more memory. Pick up a Memory Stick Micro for PSPgo owners and a Memory Stick PRO Duo for earlier versions of the PSP.

Memory Stick PRO Duo
Starting at $19.99 (2GB) | www.us.playstation.com



Resistance Retribution
$39.99 | SCEA
It's easy to overlook *Retribution* because it landed early in the year. Don't—it's an amazing achievement and easily the best PSP shooter available.

LittleBigPlanet
$39.99 | SCEA
Play. Create. Share. If that doesn't epitomize the Christmas spirit, what does? Don't forget to pop a Santa hat on your Sackboy.



Memory Stick Micro
Starting at $19.99 (2GB) | www.us.playstation.com

7 Huge PS2 games

The PS2's best for gamers and a few for the kiddies

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 4
$39.99 | Atlus
Students battle demons in this superb RPG

Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner 2
$39.99 | Atlus
A detective battles… more demons

Ultimate Ninja 4: Naruto Shippuden
$39.99 | Namco Bandai
Ninja combat still rages on PS2

Eternal Poison
$29.99 | Atlus
Strategy-RPG fans need no antidote here

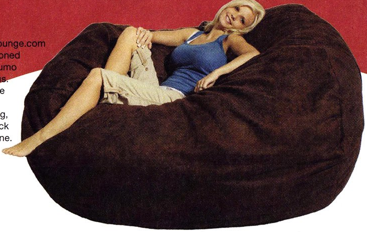
Kids Korner

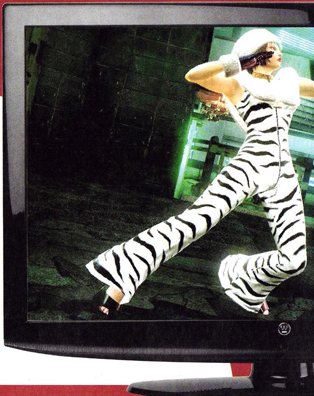
G-Force
$29.99 | Disney Interactive
Secret agent Guinea Pigs: deadly cute

Monsters vs. Aliens
$29.99 | Activision
Monsters rule, aliens drool

Secret Agent Clank
$19.99 | SCEA
Secret agent robot at a nice price

Sumo Lounge Bean Bags ►
Starting at $199.99 | www.sumolounge.com
Comfort is key when you're cocooned away in your home theater and Sumo bean bags are downright luxurious. The Gamer model is great if space is an issue, while the enormous Gigantor offers multiplayer seating, but the mid-sized Sultan is our pick for the ultimate single-player throne.





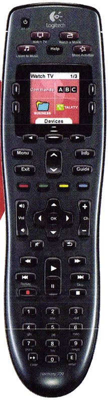
6 Hot Home Theater

Just the ticket for the gamer cave

► Westinghouse 42-inch TX-42F970Z 1080p LCD HDTV
$749.99 | www.westinghousedigital.com
Westinghouse's latest LCD HDTV offers impressive performance at an astoundingly low price. A 120Hz refresh rate and full hi-def 1080p-capability ensure that the PS3's capabilities will be fully utilized with this set.

► Boston Acoustics SoundWare XS 5.1
$499.99 |
www.bostonacoustics.com
This stylish surround sound system extracts incredible performance from its compact speakers. The speaker' unique polyhedron shape allows them to sit or be mounted at a wide range of angles.

▼ Sony BRAVIA 32-inch KDL-32S5100 1080p LCD HDTV
$699.99 | www.sonystyle.com
Serious gamers prefer the immediacy of a smaller screen. The KDL-32S5100 sports the features and resolution of a larger-size HDTV in a more efficient package perfect for bedrooms or dorm rooms.



◄ Logitech Harmony Adapter for PlayStation 3
$59.99 (remote sold separately) |
www.logitech.com
AV aficionados love the Harmony remote and its ability to control every device in their Home Theater. The Harmony Adaptor extends that one-stop control capability to all 51 commands on your PS3.

5 Instrumental Gear

Get equipped to Rock the world

ION Drum Rocker ►
$299.99 | www.drumrocker.com
The ION Drum Rocker has been out for months, but it's still the best gaming drum controller on the market—because it's a *real* drum kit in disguise. Hook up an optional Drum Sound Module to make it a fully functional electronic drum set.

Logitech Wireless Guitar ►
$199.99 |
www.logitech.com
If your rock star's skills and attitude have outgrown pint-sized, plastic guitar controllers, it's time to step up to Logitech's full-sized wooden masterpiece. The Wireless Guitar doesn't just look like a real guitar, it feels like one too.

▲ I-CON Rock Throne
$29.99 | www.i-con-products.com
Nothing kills a Rock 'n' Roll fantasy like sitting on a dining room chair while playing drums. The Rock Throne will improve comfort and performance.

▲ Sony HT-CT500
$499.99 |
www.sonystyle.com
The HT-CT500's sound bar and subwoofer setup is perfect for those seeking a simpler, more streamlined approach to superior sound. Count on a sub-15 minute install to access 400 watts of audio power.

Chart Toppers

Music games that have the beat

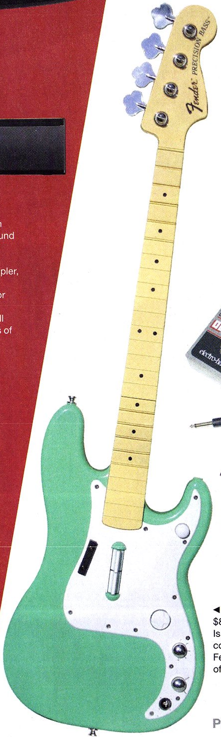
Guitar Hero 5
$59.99 |
Activision/
Red Octane

The Beatles: Rock Band
$59.99 |
MTV Games

SingStar Queen
$39.99 | SCEA

DJ Hero
$119.99 (with turntable) |
Activision

▲ Mad Catz Rock Band 2 Electro-Harmonix Overdrive Pedal
$89.99 | www.madcatz.com
Tired of missing out on 100-percent because activating Overdrive messed with your timing? Perfection is just a foot-click away thanks to the Overdrive Pedal.



◄ Mad Catz Rock Band Wireless Fender Precision Bass
$89.99 | www.madcatz.com
Is your bass player tired of being forced to use a guitar controller? Mad Catz's new controller is a dead ringer of Fender's classic bass and the exclusive split strum bar even offers a competitive gaming edge.

4 Gamewear

Taking GQ to a whole new level

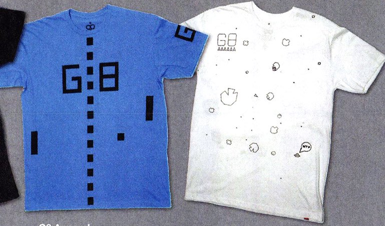
◀ Gunnar Digital Performance Eyewear
Starting at $79.99 | www.gunnars.com
It sounds like hype, but Gunnar's range of indoor digital performance eyewear actually enhances contrast, optical resolution, and detail during gameplay. We covet their stylish outdoor line as well.

SONY
PSP
SELECT
START

3 Superior Systems

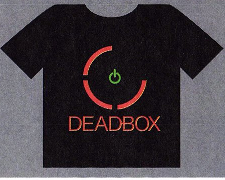
No matter which system you choose, the best gaming is still on a PlayStation

▼ PlayStation 3
$299 (120GB); $349 (250GB) | SCEA
The most-powerful gaming system available just got leaner and meaner. And with a gamer-friendly price tag of just $299 for the 120GB, or just $50 more for the voluminous 250GB model, there's really no reason not to pick one up. Play the best next-gen games, watch Blu-rays, go online, download all manner of media—it really does do everything... Except make sammiches, but they're working on that.

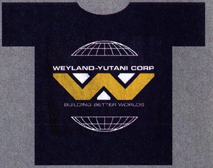


G8 Apparel
Starting at $28.00 | www.g8brand.com
G8 blends urban design with game themes for its fashions. It's a sophisticated, contemporary look, with the retro gaming wear being particularly cool.

VideoGameTees
$23.00 | www.videogametees.com
VideoGameTees offers humorous gaming-themed shirts ranging from retro to modern. While technically not a PlayStation shirt, we sorta like this one best.

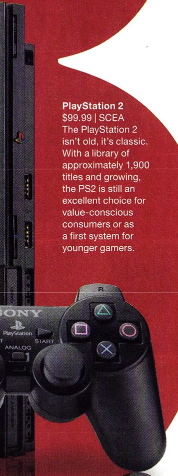


Last Exit to Nowhere T-shirts
$28.50 | www.lastexittonowhere.com
Last Exit to Nowhere's designs are based on fictional entities from movies and TV. We love the *Aliens*-inspired wear, but there's so much more…



◄ **PSPgo**
$249.99 | SCEA
The PSPgo sports all the power of the PSP—and even more performance—in a smaller, sexier package. Internet-connectivity and 16GB of built-in memory for your games, music, and video downloads means that all your entertainment needs are in the palm of your hands.

PlayStation 2
$99.99 | SCEA
The PlayStation 2 isn't old, it's classic. With a library of approximately 1,900 titles and growing, the PS2 is still an excellent choice for value-conscious consumers or as a first system for younger gamers.



2 Girl Gamer Couture

Look great while fraggin' the fanboys

GAMEDAR
ゲームダー

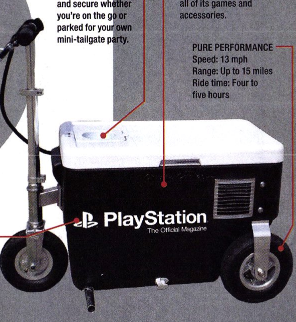
Gamedar Fashions
$25.00 (each) | www.gamedar.com
Gamedar specializes in fashions for female gamers. Their Shizuka T-shirt and Gamedar bag skirt the fine line between style and girl geekdom perfectly.

WaSaBi Hand Pouch
$30.99 | www.my-wasabi.com
WaSaBi's beautiful Hand Pouch series is designed for the PSP, but its soft cloth interior will pamper a PSPgo just as well. A matching strap is included.

1 Cool Ride

What we'll be riding at next year's E3

Cruzin Cooler
Starting at $399 |
www.cruzincooler.com
Every year it's the same E3 story: after a long day of trekking from one end of the convention floor to the other, our dogs are barking and we'd kill for some liquid refreshment. Cruzin Cooler—a motorized ride-on cooler—fulfills all of PTOM's E3 needs, but we also think it's a bit of good ol' American multi-purpose genius that'll serve gamers well the whole year around. Just imagine tossing your PS3 gear into the hold and rollin' over to your friends house on this baby… Sweet.



DRINK AND DRIVE
Note the built-in cup holder that'll hold your drink safe and secure whether you're on the go or parked for your own mini-tailgate party.

KILLER CAPACITY
24 12-ounce cans and eight pounds of ice, or your PS3 and most all of its games and accessories.

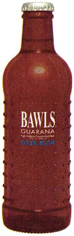
PURE PERFORMANCE
Speed: 13 mph
Range: Up to 15 miles
Ride time: Four to five hours

PIMP THAT RIDE
When you're rollin' in a ride as sick as this one, you know ya gotta represent.

STOCKING STUFFERS

All the other stuff gamers want

FUELS FOR THE FIRE



BAWLS G33K B33R
$32.99 (24-pack) | www.bawls.com
High-caffeine root beer infused with various other performance enhancers. Drink 'em if ya got 'em.

Gamer Grub
$3.99 |
www.gamergrub.com
Scientifically formulated performance snacks designed for gamers. No crumbs or greasy fingers either.

WE STILL PLAY WITH TOYS TOO

LEGO Star Wars: Darth Vader's TIE Fighter
$29.99 | www.lego.com
LEGO: Best toy ever… besides videogames.

Bakugan 7n1 Maxus Drago
$39.99 |
www.spinmaster.com
We don't really understand Bakugan, but there are seven of them here and they join together to form a giant Bakugan…awesome.

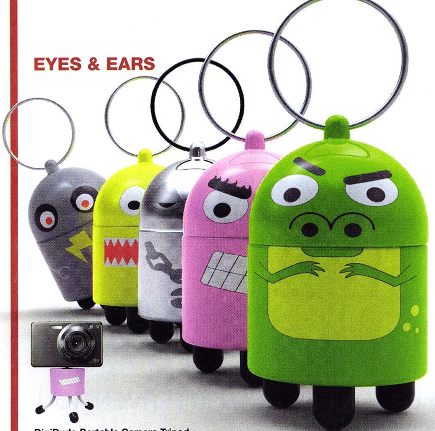
Air Hogs Zero Gravity Laser
$39.99 | www.spinmaster.com
A gravity-defying, wall-riding R/C car controlled with a *laser.* So glorious, our brains may explode.

THE EASY WAY OUT

GameFly Holiday Gift Certificate
Starting at $15.95/month
www.gamefly.com
Game rentals: the gift that keeps on giving all year long.

PlayStation Network Card
Available in $20 and $50 denominations www.us.playstation.com
Fund your gamer's PSN buying frenzy.

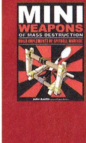
EYES & EARS



DigiDude Portable Camera Tripod
$24.99 | www.quirky.com
Cute, quirky, convenient, and downright ingenious—our snapshots might actually be in focus for a change.

Fretlight Guitar
Starting at $499.95 | www.fretlight.com
Mastered *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero?* Are you ready to rock the real world? The Fretlight Guitar is an interactive learning system that features a fret board that lights up to show you the correct fingerings. Time to step up, rock star.

READING IS ESSENTIAL



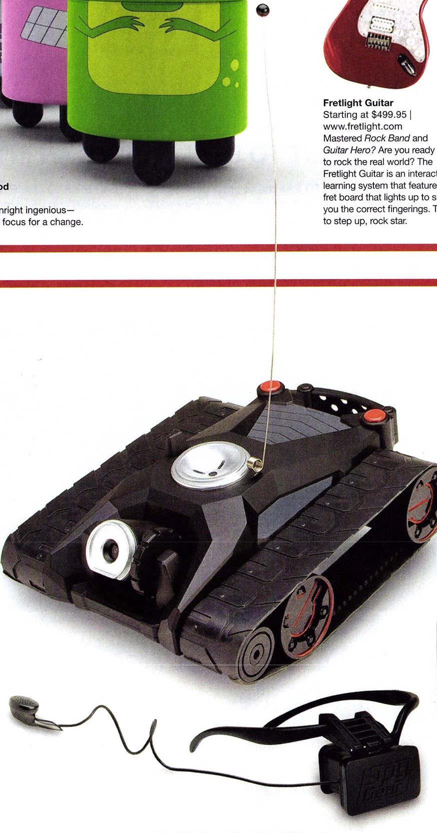
Mini Weapons of Mass Destruction
$16.95 | www.chicagoreviewpress.com
A how-to on building spitball-launching war machines. Splat.

Marvel Digital Comics
$9.99/month; $59.88/annual | www.marvel.com/digital-comics/
Unlimited access to thousands of digital Marvel comics—comic book heaven.

Nerdcore 2010 Calendar
$25.00 | www.totallynerdcore.com
If you're not allowed to play Mature-rated games, this saucy pin-up calendar isn't for you.

Skeleflex Warriors
$14.95 | www.wildplanet.com
Skeleton Warriors that you construct—let the desktop battles begin.

SwitchBlade Transforming Stunt Flier
$29.99 | www.spinmaster.com
Think of it as an R/C UFO for nerds. We like.



Spy Video ATV-360
$99.99 | www.wildplanet.com
An R/C tank with working surveillance equipment. Oh, the possibilities…

BORDERLANDS
Demon's Souls
NINJA GAIDEN
THE SABOTEUR
OPERATION FLASHPOINT DRAGON RISING
DRAGON AGE ORIGINS
REFLEX
PINBALL HALL OF FAME
AFRIKA

TOP 10 GAMES YOU'RE DOOMED TO MISS THIS HOLIDAY

THEY ROCK. YOU'RE ABOUT TO ROLL. THIS IS AN INTERVENTION

BY TYLER NAGATA

FACT #1: YOU'RE ABOUT TO let a ton of great gaming slip right through your fingers. But don't trip; it's not your fault. Even in this super-bizarro year when everything seems to be moving from the holidays into early 2010, there are simply too many titles hitting store shelves at once for you to track them all. You'll inevitably miss some that you would have loved. Which brings us to **FACT #2: THAT SUCKS.**

ENTER FACT#3: PTOM is here to help. We've scoured the universe and located the 10 PS3 games you're most likely to unjustly ignore this holiday season. Now it's your turn—read this, buy these games, and prove us to be utterly mistaken. For once, being completely wrong would give us hope.

1 BORDERLANDS

Publisher: 2K Games **Developer:** Gearbox Software **Release Date:** October 20, 2009

WHAT IS IT?

An FPS/RPG hybrid that's a little like *Fallout 3,* a bit like *Diablo* and *Left 4 Dead,* and a whole lot of fun.

WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT

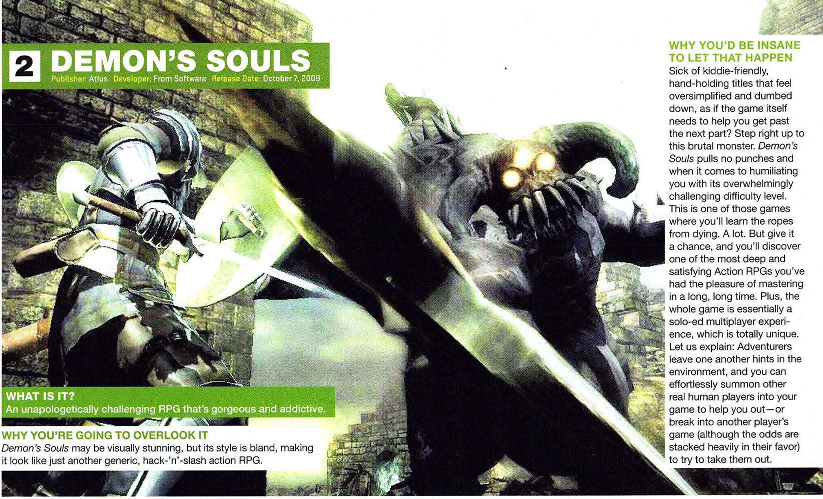
Its identity is vague; there's no central character for people to recognize, and a striking number of gamers don't really know what the game *is.* Finally, naysayers have labeled *Borderlands* as a "poor man's" *Fallout 3.* Don't listen to them. They're crazy.

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN

One word: Style. *Borderland's* has it in spades. The recently colonized planet of Pandora, may *sound* like the *Mad Max*-ish wasteland you've seen in *Fallout 3.* But thanks to the game's unique art direction, it *looks* vibrant, fresh, and explosive. More importantly, it plays great, blending twitchy first-person shooter gameplay and RPG goodness like a charm. There are vehicles, including tanks. There are more than *half-a-million* different kinds of guns. Best of all, there's four-player co-op, which lets you complete quests with friends for extra challenges and better loot—and PvP modes for those who want to prove their skill online. Need more convincing? Read our full review on page 66—then go to the store.

2 DEMON'S SOULS

Publisher: Atlus **Developer:** From Software **Release Date:** October 7, 2009



WHAT IS IT?

An unapologetically challenging RPG that's gorgeous and addictive.

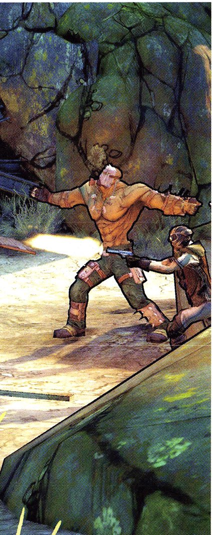
WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT

Demon's Souls may be visually stunning, but its style is bland, making it look like just another generic, hack-'n'-slash action RPG.

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN

Sick of kiddie-friendly, hand-holding titles that feel oversimplified and dumbed down, as if the game itself needs to help you get past the next part? Step right up to this brutal monster. *Demon's Souls* pulls no punches and when it comes to humiliating you with its overwhelmingly challenging difficulty level. This is one of those games where you'll learn the ropes from dying. A lot. But give it a chance, and you'll discover one of the most deep and satisfying Action RPGs you've had the pleasure of mastering in a long, long time. Plus, the whole game is essentially a solo-ed multiplayer experience, which is totally unique. Let us explain: Adventurers leave one another hints in the environment, and you can effortlessly summon other real human players into your game to help you out—or break into another player's game (although the odds are stacked heavily in their favor) to try to take them out.

▼ ***Borderlands* is easy to describe: it's *Road Warrior* meets *Fallout 3* meets *Left 4 Dead* meets *World of Warcraft* meets…**



3 NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA 2

Publisher: Tecmo **Developer:** Team Ninja **Release Date:** September 29, 2009

WHAT IS IT?

A re-mastered version of *Ninja Gaiden II.* So lots of hacky, slashy wall-running action.

WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT

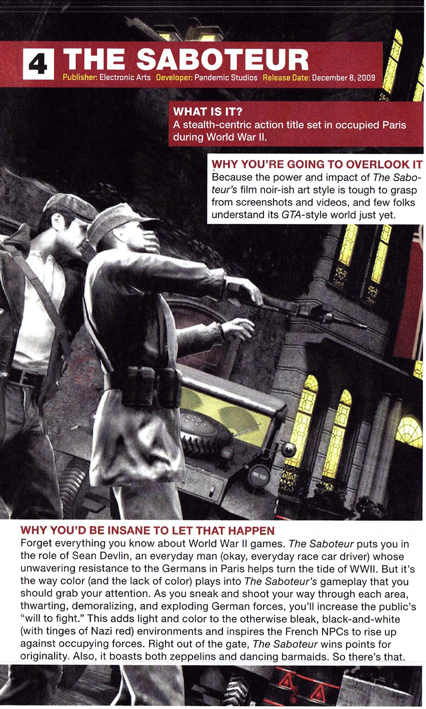
Because it's a port of a year-old Xbox 360 title and you heard the gore was toned down in the PS3 version—which is actually true.

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN

Because the gameplay still rocks, and sometimes good things come to those who wait. *Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2* is a re-release of *Ninja Gaiden II* for the Xbox 360, but it features new bosses (including the Statue of *freaking* Liberty), new weapons, and three exclusive playable characters. PS3 players will be slicing and dicing with the striking Ayane (previously seen in the *Dead or Alive* series), the axe-wielding blonde Rachel, and the lovely Momiji from *Ninja Gaiden Dragon Sword* on the Nintendo DS. Finally, thanks to Team Ninja's infamous pervi-ness, *Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2* also introduces an exclusive SixAxis feature that allows you to jiggle the overly ample bosoms of the female leads during cutscenes… That is, if you're into that sort of thing.

4 THE SABOTEUR

Publisher: Electronic Arts **Developer:** Pandemic Studios **Release Date:** December 8, 2009



WHAT IS IT?

A stealth-centric action title set in occupied Paris during World War II.

WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT

Because the power and impact of *The Saboteur's* film noir-ish art style is tough to grasp from screenshots and videos, and few folks understand its *GTA*-style world just yet.

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN

Forget everything you know about World War II games. *The Saboteur* puts you in the role of Sean Devlin, an everyday man (okay, everyday race car driver) whose unwavering resistance to the Germans in Paris helps turn the tide of WWII. But it's the way color (and the lack of color) plays into *The Saboteur's* gameplay that you should grab your attention. As you sneak and shoot your way through each area, thwarting, demoralizing, and exploding German forces, you'll increase the public's "will to fight." This adds light and color to the otherwise bleak, black-and-white (with tinges of Nazi red) environments and inspires the French NPCs to rise up against occupying forces. Right out of the gate, *The Saboteur* wins points for originality. Also, it boasts both zeppelins and dancing barmaids. So there's that.

5 TEKKEN 6

Publisher: Namco Bandai **Developer:** Namco Bandai **Release Date:** October 27, 2009

WHAT IS IT?

The latest entry in the revered 3D one-on-one fighting series.

WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT

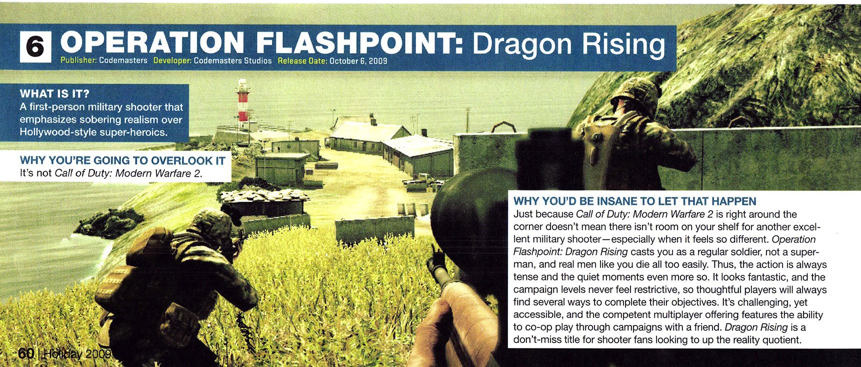
Because you've still got *Street Fighter IV* and *BlazBlue: Calamity Trigger* on the brain and you already played *Tekken 2* back in 1996.

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN

The *Tekken* series may not have received substantial updates in quite some time, but the fighting engine works so well, that it doesn't really need them. Fresh levels, a fistful of new characters, and a revived two-player beat-'em-up mode makes *Tekken 6* the biggest installment of the formidable fighting series to date. *Tekken* fans can look forward to mastering the new Rage system, which gives you more power when you're low on health. There's also the bound system, which will allow combo artists to work their craft as they slam their opponent to the ground in *Tekken 6's* multi-tiered stages. Plus, it's gorgeous.

6 OPERATION FLASHPOINT: Dragon Rising

Publisher: Codemasters **Developer:** Codemasters Studios **Release Date:** October 6, 2009



WHAT IS IT?

A first-person military shooter that emphasizes sobering realism over Hollywood-style super-heroics.

WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT

It's not *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2.*

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN

Just because *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* is right around the corner doesn't mean there isn't room on your shelf for another excellent military shooter—especially when it feels so different. *Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising* casts you as a regular soldier, not a superman, and real men like you die all too easily. Thus, the action is always tense and the quiet moments even more so. It looks fantastic, and the campaign levels never feel restrictive, so thoughtful players will always find several ways to complete their objectives. It's challenging, yet accessible, and the competent multiplayer offering features the ability to co-op play through campaigns with a friend. *Dragon Rising* is a don't-miss title for shooter fans looking to up the reality quotient.

7 DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

Publisher: Electronic Arts **Developer:** BioWare **Release Date:** November 17, 2009

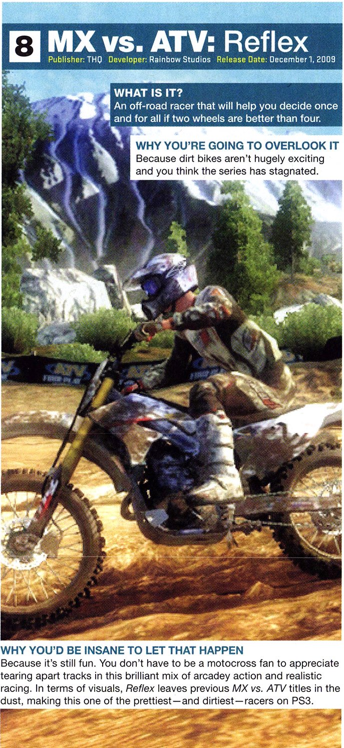
WHAT IS IT?
A fantasy RPG from the creators of *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Mass Effect*.

WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT
At first glance, *Dragon Age: Origins* looks like a generic western RPG designed for grumpity PC gamers. Or you hated the sex-and-blood PR campaign, especially the E3 trailer and its Marilyn Manson soundtrack.

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN
Everything about *Dragon Age: Origins* is epic. From the moment you create your character to the game's laundry list of side-quests and selectable party members, *Origins* is filled to the brim with things to do and enemies to kill for glorious loot. After your first 10 hours of questing, expect to be awed and surprised when you discover that you've only seen a fraction of what this monstrous RPG has to offer.

8 MX vs. ATV: Reflex

Publisher: THQ **Developer:** Rainbow Studios **Release Date:** December 1, 2009



WHAT IS IT?
An off-road racer that will help you decide once and for all if two wheels are better than four.

WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT
Because dirt bikes aren't hugely exciting and you think the series has stagnated.

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN
Because it's still fun. You don't have to be a motocross fan to appreciate tearing apart tracks in this brilliant mix of arcadey action and realistic racing. In terms of visuals, *Reflex* leaves previous *MX vs. ATV* titles in the dust, making this one of the prettiest—and dirtiest—racers on PS3.

9 PINBALL HALL OF FAME: The Williams Collection

Publisher: Crave Ent. **Developer:** FarSight Studios **Release Date:** September 22, 2009

Medieval Madness

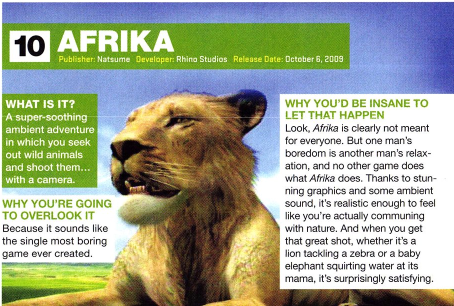
WHAT IS IT?
A tribute to 13 classic Williams pinball tables.

WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT
Because if you don't know these tables, you probably don't know how sophisticated pinball is.

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN
This isn't some run-of-the-mill pinball game you'd find pre-installed on your computer next to Solitaire. This is a stunning collection of real pinball tables, lovingly recreated in digital form. It's one of (if not *the*) best pinball games of all-time because it looks, sounds, and (most importantly) feels so wonderfully accurate. Plus, it has Medieval Madness, one of the most beloved pinball tables in history.

10 AFRIKA

Publisher: Natsume **Developer:** Rhino Studios **Release Date:** October 6, 2009



WHAT IS IT?
A super-soothing ambient adventure in which you seek out wild animals and shoot them... with a camera.

WHY YOU'RE GOING TO OVERLOOK IT
Because it sounds like the single most boring game ever created.

WHY YOU'D BE INSANE TO LET THAT HAPPEN
Look, *Afrika* is clearly not meant for everyone. But one man's boredom is another man's relaxation, and no other game does what *Afrika* does. Thanks to stunning graphics and some ambient sound, it's realistic enough to feel like you're actually communing with nature. And when you get that great shot, whether it's a lion tackling a zebra or a baby elephant squirting water at its mama, it's surprisingly satisfying.

TURN YOUR PASSION FOR GAMING INTO A CAREER

Game Art
Bachelor's Degree Program
Campus & Online

Game Development
Bachelor's Degree Program

Game Design
Master's Degree Program

Game Design
Bachelor's Degree Program
Online

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Campus Degrees

Master's
Entertainment Business
▸ Game Design

Bachelor's
Computer Animation
Digital Arts & Design
Entertainment Business
Film
▸ Game Art
▸ Game Development
Music Business
Recording Arts
Show Production
Web Design & Development

Associate's
Graphic Design

Online Degrees

Master's
Education Media Design & Technology
Entertainment Business
Entertainment Business: *with a Sports Management Elective Track*
Internet Marketing
Media Design

Bachelor's
Computer Animation
Entertainment Business
▸ Game Art
▸ Game Design
Graphic Design
Internet Marketing
Music Business
Web Design & Development

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Reviews

Scores | Analysis | Buying Advice

RATINGS

★★★★★ **LEGENDARY**
A game so amazing, the entire PTOM staff recommends it. A must buy!

★★★★½ **SUPERB**
Not quite a timeless classic, but one of the finest of its breed.

★★★★ **GREAT!**
A finely crafted, thoroughly enjoyable experience. Worth your time and money.

★★★½ **SOLID**
A strong game. We noticed some flaws, but there's more to like than loathe.

★★★ **ENJOYABLE**
If the topic/license/style is your thing, there's enough to keep you entertained.

★★½ **MEDIOCRE**
An equal blend of sweet and sour. Discerning gamers can find better.

★★ **SCARRED**
A smattering of entertainment hidden amongst an abundance of flaws.

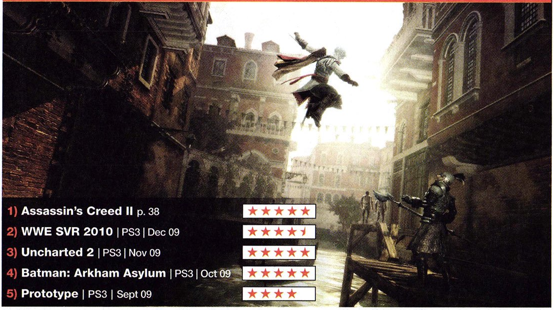
★½ **FRUSTRATING**
"Argh!" will be the self-created soundtrack of this game. No thank you.

★ **PAINFUL**
We played it so you don't have to. Now you owe us cookies.

½ **BROKEN**
Hey, it comes in a free plastic box! Wee!

Win junk from Eric's desk! We'll select one winner from emails that correctly identify the three photos from our Rating scale and explain how they're related. Send your answers with the subject line "Holiday Ratings" to PTOM_Letters@futureus.com.

Hot 5 List Top Picks from Recent Issues



1) **Assassin's Creed II** p. 38	★★★★★
2) **WWE SVR 2010** | PS3 | Dec 09	★★★★½
3) **Uncharted 2** | PS3 | Nov 09	★★★★★
4) **Batman: Arkham Asylum** | PS3 | Oct 09	★★★★★
5) **Prototype** | PS3 | Sept 09	★★★★

Meet the experts delivering your buying advice

The Holidays are a time for giving, but PTOM gives, gives, gives all year long. Here's what we *want.*

ERIC BRATCHER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Eric would like for all the politicians and pundits in the U.S. to drop the party-vs.-party crap and do what they honestly believe will do the most good for the greatest number of people. Barring that, he'd like restored HD versions of all 28-plus Godzilla movies on Blu-ray, with original Japanese dialogue and *good* English subtitles. And yes, he knows the first one is more likely.

NOW PLAYING: *Brütal Legend,* the *Fallout 3* DLC, *Uncharted 2, CoD: Modern Warfare 2*

ROGER BURCHILL
MANAGING EDITOR

Well, there's the obvious stuff...an Audi S5, Megan Fox, and the San Francisco Giants winning a World Series, but for Roger it's the little things that count. So he'd settle for a new *Jumping Flash!* game for the PS3, a second analog stick for the PSP, and all the *Ultraman* toys his mom threw in the trash on moving day when he was five-years-old. That's not asking for too much, is it?

NOW PLAYING: *Guitar Hero 5, The Beatles: Rock Band, Gran Turismo PSP*

KEN BOUSQUET
ART DIRECTOR

A $500 gift certificate to Zappos.com, a Setanta Sports network subscription, a hot tub, and Liverpool-Everton derby tickets. Peace on Earth. Good will to all men, women, and children. The sudden extinction of all attack dogs. Ronaldo's personal trainer. 20 lbs. of exotic chocolate. Something very small and special wrapped in a tiny box with exquisite wrapping that just *looks* like it's going to be incredible. Maybe it's a key?

NOW PLAYING: *FIFA Soccer 10, Brütal Legend, Assassin's Creed II*

SCOTT BUTTERWORTH
ASSISTANT EDITOR

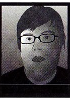
Hover board. Yeah, that's right, Scott wants a legitimate, full-on *Back to the Future Part II* hover board. Oh, what's that? You say they don't exist? You say they spit in the face of honest science? Tough. Santa Claus doesn't take orders from "science," okay guys? Santa makes his own rules! And come Christmas morning, he better come through with a hover board...or else.

NOW PLAYING: *Assassin's Creed II, Tekken 6, Borderlands*

CARLOS RUIZ
INTERN

Carlos the Intern is very practical about his gifts. His stereo's tape player is broken and the speakers are fading so he'd like an iLive Portable Stereo System with CD Player, AM/FM Radio, and iPod dock. And he's about $8,699 short of the $8,699 he needs in his Motorcycle Fund, so if you could just drop off a Triumph Speedmaster, that'd be awesome. Oh, and some new socks.

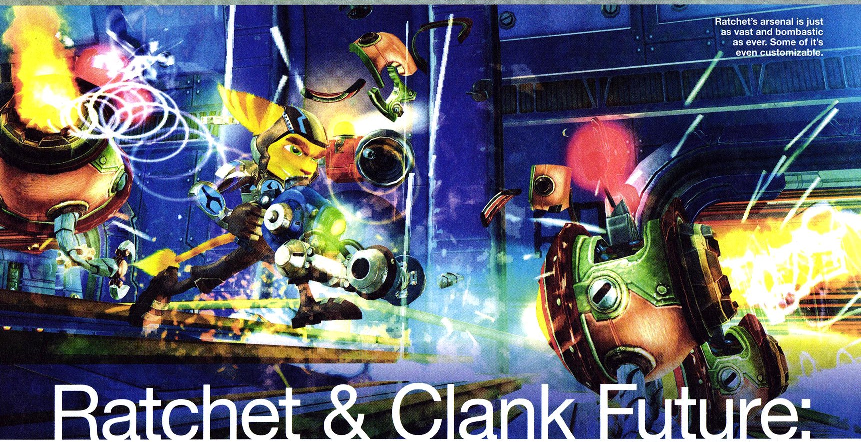
NOW PLAYING: *Batman: Arkham Asylum; Marvel vs. Capcom 2*



HENRY GILBERT
GAMESRADAR

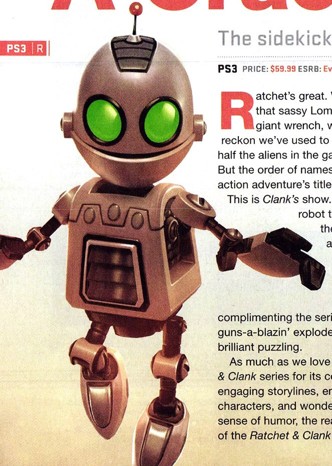
Aside from the usual things like new games or a solid gold house, Henry wants a TV channel that plays nothing but cartoon Xmas specials all December long. Be it *Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol, How the Grinch Stole Christmas,* or *Yogi's First Christmas,* they all warm his bitter heart. Sure, the *Peanuts* special only offers a short respite from holiday stress and editorial deadlines, but what a lovely 30 minutes it is.

NOW PLAYING: *SmackDown vs. Raw 2010, Brütal Legend, Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2*



Ratchet's arsenal is just as vast and bombastic as ever. Some of it's even customizable.

Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time



The sidekick steals the show in a diverse, triumphant sequel

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+ PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: Insomniac

Ratchet's great. We truly adore that sassy Lombax and his giant wrench, which we reckon we've used to brain-bash half the aliens in the galaxy by now. But the order of names in his latest action adventure's title is *all*-wrong.

This is *Clank's* show. The little robot that could rips the spotlight away from his co-star with an exceptionally fun performance, complimenting the series' trademark guns-a-blazin' explodery with some brilliant puzzling.

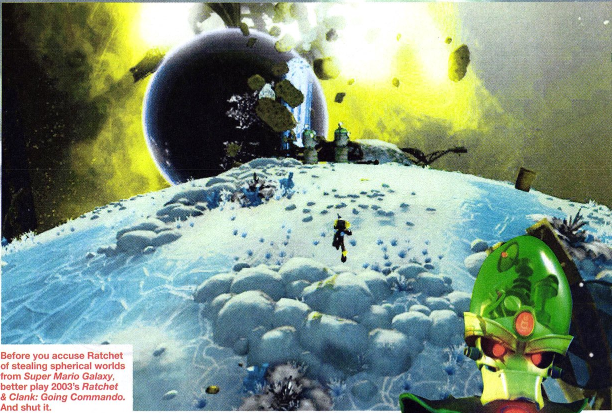
As much as we love the *Ratchet & Clank* series for its consistently engaging storylines, endearing characters, and wonderfully quirky sense of humor, the real appeal of the *Ratchet & Clank* games has always been their ability to blend genres to great effect—especially when it results in a large explosion. *Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time* is simultaneously an adventure game, a platformer, a shooter, a puzzler, and sometimes even a rhythm game. By splitting the famous duo up and giving them separate levels and tasks, Insomniac has been able to construct an even more varied and rich experience, which thankfully feels fresh and new rather than spread too thin.

As Ratchet, you'll team up with superhero Captain Quark to explore the cosmos in the *Aphelion.* You'll take on missions, land on moons, and upgrade both your weapons and ship while fighting the forces of the dastardly (and quite straightforwardly-named) Dr. Nefarious. You'll blast enemies with the series' trademark bizarre weaponry (like the Chimp-o-Matic, which transforms your enemies into chimpanzees), engage in some fun platforming, grind a few rails, and take down many larger-than-life bosses.

Along the way, you'll also meet Azimuth, the mysterious elder Lombax who is an old friend of Clank's father, and together you'll explore the beautifully detailed, brilliantly imaginative worlds for which the *Ratchet & Clank* series is so well known. As you'd expect, there's a lot to do and explore, and all the weapons and gadgets are as fun to use (and upgrade) as ever.

Worth Replaying

But the familiar *Ratchet & Clank* formula is only half of the package, and we think Clank's contribution is the more compelling addition. Clank spends most of his time in the Great Clock, a device located in the exact



Before you accuse Ratchet of stealing spherical worlds from *Super Mario Galaxy*, better play 2003's *Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando.* And shut it.

center of the universe that controls the space-time continuum. You'll discover that Clank's late dad built it, so our brave little toaster takes up the helm with the help of the junior caretaker Sigmund and the Time Scepter, a tool that can kill small enemies, repair broken objects, or fire a "time bubble" which will slow down anything that falls inside it. Now, time manipulation puzzles are nothing new *(Prince of Persia* trilogy, *Braid,* Sylvia in *Viewtiful Joe 2),* but we're not sick of 'em yet, and Clank's approach is certainly among the best.

Clank has the ability to record himself for up to a minute by activating "time pads" littered around the Great Clock. For example, you can record yourself standing on a pressure-sensitive switch to unlock a door, and then play back the recording—which will still press the switch and unlock the door—thus enabling your actual self to run through.

But that's kiddie stuff. Now imagine that central puzzle-solving mechanic with multi-layered challenges that rival the complexity of *Portal,* and with the ability to make a whole stack of recordings, and you have an idea of how Clank's quest plays out. This type of puzzle solving wouldn't work unless the puzzles themselves were particularly clever, but thankfully, they are. When you have four or five copies of yourself working in perfect sync, it's hard not to feel like a time-bending badass.

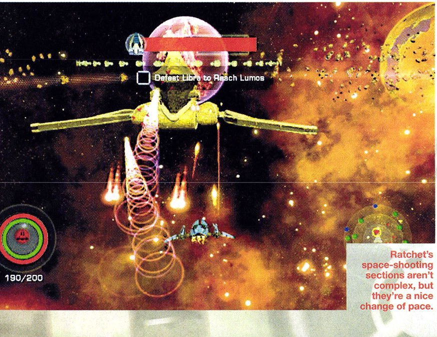
But unlike some of those *other* time-manipulation games, *A Crack in Time* is rarely frustrating—it's easy to delete and create recordings, the hint system is extremely helpful in a pinch, and if you get stuck, you can pay a few thousand bolts to skip the offending puzzle altogether. (Stick it out if you can, though. The feeling of accomplishment—combined with shower of bolts you get when you finish a tricky challenge—more than makes up for a few moments of frustration.) And just before you start to get fatigued by the brain-busting the game is putting you through, it throws you a curve ball—suddenly, you're blasting time anomalies on a spinning 3D globe in a shoot-'em-up mini-game. Nice touch, developers.

Déjà New

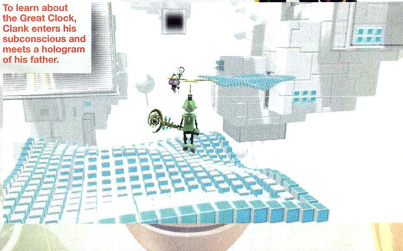
Insomniac is to be applauded: we're impressed with the intelligently-crafted puzzles in Clank's half of the game, but really, it's the sheer variety of tasks and the confidence with which these elements are woven together that makes us want to cheer. The game's charming story and characters are accompanied by fun, compelling gameplay mechanics in both time-tested and totally new styles. We're eager, as always, to see where the series goes from here, but in the meantime, we'll have plenty of universe to explore.

James Coates

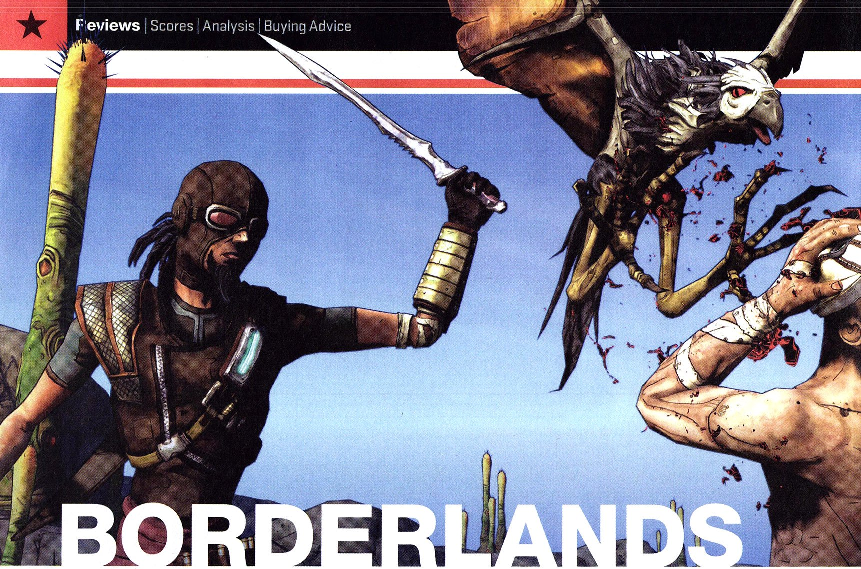
★★★★½



Ratchet's space-shooting sections aren't complex, but they're a nice change of pace.



To learn about the Great Clock, Clank enters his subconscious and meets a hologram of his father.



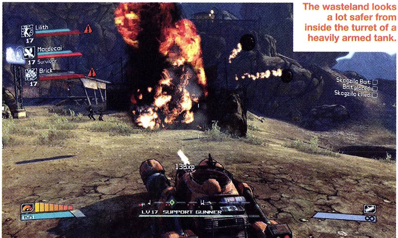
BORDERLANDS

A four-player cross between *Fallout 3* and *World of Warcraft*. And it *works*

PS3 | R **PS3** PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Gearbox

There are two things you should know from the start about *Borderlands*—it's damn good in solo mode and it's notably better in four-player co-op mode. In fact, we'd even say that 2K Games have a genuine *Fallout 3* rival on their hands—and you could argue that *Borderlands'* cel-shaded visuals are better.

It all takes place on a planet called Pandora, a desolate wasteland where colonists have descended in the hope of finding their fortune. Sadly, what they find is a whole host of alien beasts intent on killing every last one of them. Cue lawless battles between rival groups as the planet turns into an intergalactic Wild West full of weapon-trading and looting.



The wasteland looks a lot safer from inside the turret of a heavily armed tank.

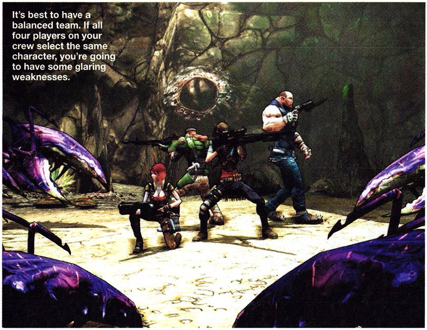
You play as one of four characters, each with unique skills. There's Lilith, who can turn herself invisible to avoid enemies, Mordecai the sniper, Roland the ex-soldier and, of course, your token muscle-head, Brick. Each one has their own reasons for being on Pandora, but they all have some sort of interest in the mysterious Vault that's supposed to be situated somewhere on the planet.

Number cruncher

Borderlands has a robust RPG underneath its FPS skin, just like *Fallout 3*. Shoot an enemy and it'll spew out XP as well as blood—dropping new weapons and ammo to boot. You'll also earn skill points to level-up your character. Upgradeable skills fall into three categories; Infantry (weapons), Support (ammo and defense), and Medic (health). These branching skill-sets come in handy when playing on a team of four with your friends. This way you can ensure there's a balance of character classes with the complementary skills necessary to keep each other alive in a firefight.

▼ A four-person squad seems like a stacked crew until you encounter something like this behemoth. Then you start wishing the game supported 16-member teams.

It's safe to say you've never seen another game that looks like *Borderlands.* The cel-shaded graphics really set it apart from other post-apocalyptic shooters.



It's best to have a balanced team. If all four players on your crew select the same character, you're going to have some glaring weaknesses.

> "2K Games have a genuine *Fallout 3* rival on their hands—and you could argue that *Borderlands'* cel-shaded visuals are better."

The missions have a real *World of Warcraft* feel about them. For anyone unfamiliar with the world's biggest MMORPG, let us explain. You get yourself tooled up with mega-weapons and armor before going out on an "instance"—basically a mission through a dungeon or other hostile environment generated just for you by the game. In each enemy-filled area, you have to collect something (in *Borderlands,* one memorable mission has you stealing a prosthetic limb) or take down a specific enemy. Some single-player missions are so tough that we found ourselves having to restart over and over again because a) we ran out of ammo, or b) we were overwhelmed by diamond-hard bad guys. It's not impossible, but we often needed extra help (or at least more powerful guns) when some of the bigger badasses shrugged off our bullets as if we were simply throwing hot gravel at them.

Need guns, lots of guns...

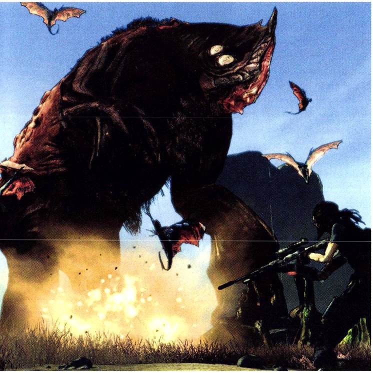
Don't fret the RPG stylings though; *Borderlands* is still an enormously satisfying First-Person Shooter. Developer Gearbox boasted about how many gun varieties would be in *Borderlands* (750,000-plus at last count) and seems to have backed up that bravado. Did we count all the guns? No, but the game's random weapon generation system, and the ability to mix and match firearms with ammo types, is impressively extensive. There are sniper pistols, bazookas, shotguns that fire wave pulses, automatic gun turrets, and much more. Some of the machine guns are so hefty that you'll think your controller is breaking apart from excessive rumbling when you squeeze off a few rounds. Best of all, scoring a critical hit with special ammo like flame bullets will set your foe on fire and wear down his health.

But for all the delicious gunplay and gorgeous visuals, *Borderlands* isn't without its nagging problems. The story starts strong and then falls off a cliff. Enemies will often stand in the same spot while you repeatedly pop sniper shots into their head. Traipsing across the landscape just to get to a mission objective can be tedious, and with all the ammo drops, points, enemies, and the HUD, there's way too much happening on-screen at times. Oh, and while we're at it, helper robot CLAPTRAP is a worthless junkheap.

Borderlands may be a little rough around the edges, and the story is less than engaging, but the overall experience is satisfying and compelling. If you get three friends to play along, it offers some of the best co-op gaming on PS3.

Nathan Irvine

★★★★



Either someone's getting roasted or this is the coolest music video of all time.

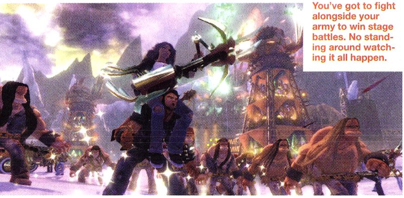
Guitars, flames, demons, battle axes, hot rods, leather everywhere…there has never been, nor will there ever be, a game that's more Metal than *Brütal Legend.*

"Designer Tim Schafer shows great reverence for Heavy Metal music, but he also knows it's ripe for ridicule, and no aspect of the genre goes unskewered."

BRÜTAL LEGEND

PS3 | R

▸ Um, well… hmm…er, well…okay… Hi.



You've got to fight alongside your army to win stage battles. No standing around watching it all happen.

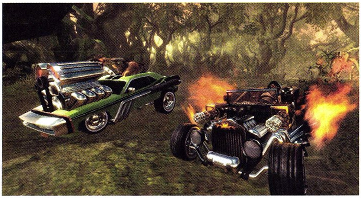
Videogaming just got its *Spinal Tap*

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Double Fine

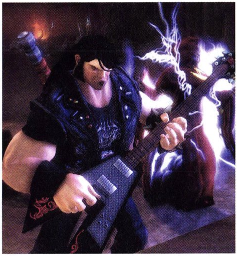
Brütal Legend melted our faces off with its utter Metal-ness, ripped apart our ribcages with the funniest jokes in gaming, and even plucked the six strings in our hearts with its simple yet effective story. An appreciation of Heavy Metal will amplify your enjoyment of this free-roaming action/driving/RTS hybrid, but isn't required.

Legend's world is so beautiful, imaginative, and architecturally interesting that one doesn't need to chuckle at stone monoliths shaped like hands throwing up the devil-horns sign to have a great time exploring the landscape and chopping up its inhabitants. Although the gameplay doesn't particularly inno-vate in any of the specific genres it covers, the unique way it mixes them keeps it varied and fun. Much of the time, *Legend* is an open-world, third-person hack-and-slasher, with Eddie motoring from one battle to the next, sundering foes with simple battle axe combos and longer-ranged strikes with his other axe: his guitar, Clementine. In this world, music is a weapon, so Clementine enables the player to call lighting and fire to rain down on foes as well as activate special abilities through solos.

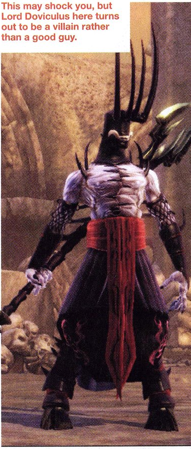
This guitar-soloing mini-game is a brief tribute to rhythm action games, in which the player times button presses for a few seconds along with a simple melody. The powerful, late-game solos become more complicated but never difficult. The most prevalent solo Eddie will play is to summon the Deuce, his sweet-ass hot rod, which makes exploring the open world much easier. It looks badass, too. Thus, it's possible to turn *Legend* into a driving game whenever the mood strikes, and



▲ There are tons of side-missions, from simple ambushes to hunting quests to races against this hot-rodder.



▲ Eddie does his dirtiest work with an actual battle-axe, but his other "axe", Clementine, can cast lightning, summon his car, and trigger power-ups.



This may shock you, but Lord Doviculus here turns out to be a villain rather than a good guy.

with various upgrade purchases, it even becomes a car-combat game. Cruising around the world discovering all the fantastic sights is one of the game's biggest draws; you never know what cool, funny landmark you'll find tucked away in a remote corner. To make the journey worthwhile, discovering these places grants you fire tributes that you can spend on upgrades.

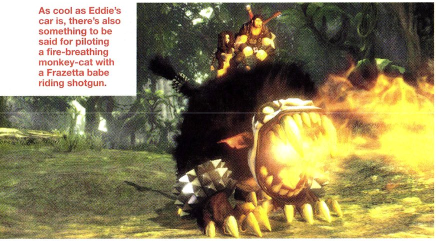
Ace of Stage

The last piece of *Brütal Legend's* gameplay mosh-pit pie is its most divisive, sure to cause some players to gnash their teeth and curse yet another attempt at pulling off a real-time strategy game on a console. Known as Stage Battles, these boss-fight-like encounters follow a familiar RTS template but replace bases with concert stages and collectable resources like gold or wood with ghostly fans whose power is channeled by building T-shirt stands. Armies are still armies, but they're composed of everything from leather-clad bikers on flaming Harleys to disembodied lady-heads that walk on spidery legs made of their own hair.

The controls in these sections are predictably clunky and commanding troops is a hassle. The game also does a poor job at explaining your options and abilities, so read the in-game encyclopedia (we got through the entire game without knowing that we could jump up on stage and use the microphone and spotlights as weapons). Note: making use of the rally-flag solo makes the entire Stage Battle process a whole lot easier.

While the strategy and tactics required are super simple, it's still necessary to build a comprehensive mix of units, because the rock-paper-scissors balance between units is extremely important—your opponent will wipe out your entire army easily and instantly if you only build one or two types of units.

But these boss battles aren't all sitting in the captain's chair watching your minions have all the fun. It's also important to get down on the battlefield (you can fly during these portions to command troops better) and fight the toughest enemies yourself. Using team-up attacks makes a huge difference—by approaching friendly units and either riding them or picking them up, Eddie can unleash devastating assaults.



As cool as Eddie's car is, there's also something to be said for piloting a fire-breathing monkey-cat with a Frazetta babe riding shotgun.

Overall, the RTS battles are frustrating, but can be rewarding when things go as intended.

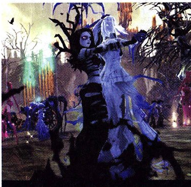
Metal on Metal

You don't have to be a Metalhead to love *Brütal Legend,* but if you are, you'll love it even more. Designer Tim Schafer shows great reverence for Heavy Metal music, but he also knows it's ripe for ridicule, and no aspect of the genre goes unskewered. Still, he takes a definite stance, lamenting the ways in which Metal lost its way over the years. And while the jabs at glam rock and pop-punk are sharp, they also enhance an underlying melancholic tone to the story. The contrast of goofy jokes and hints of glory lost bring a satisfying emotional complexity to an otherwise basic plot. But how it impacts you depends on whether you miss the good ol' days of headbanger rock.

The final important element that enabled *Legend* to win us over is the cast of characters. Funny, sympathetic, and charming encounters make the story into more than its basic parts. We like Eddie and his friends, and the cameos by real Heavy Metal legends such as Lemmy Kilmister, Ozzy Osbourne, and others are a real treat. In fact, we enjoyed just hanging out with the cast so much we were legitimately sad when it was over. It ended too quickly and we wanted more. Bring on *Brütal Legend 2*—this performance deserves an encore.

Matt Keast

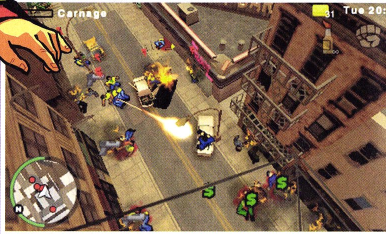
★★★★½



Multiplayer mode is the only place you can command enemy armies, such as the Goth-y Drowning Doom.

Caught in a [Multiplayer] Mosh

Brütal Legend isn't just a single-player gig—two to eight players can continue rocking out online. The multiplayer matches are Stage Battles, so it'll only appeal to those who dig the RTS elements. Fighting human opponents enables more interesting strategies and is the only way to play as the enemy factions, with their unique units and abilities. It's not as robust as the single-player experience, but it's a fun diversion.



Don't let the old-school look fool you—*Chinatown Wars* racks up a serious body cou

Grand Theft Auto: **Chinatown Wars**

Not only does crime pay, it plays great too

PSP | R

PSP PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: Rockstar Games DEVELOPER: Rockstar Leeds/ Rockstar North

At first glance, *Chinatown Wars* seems like a massive downgrade from previous *Grand Theft Auto* efforts on PSP, and you'd be right to think both *Liberty City Stories* and *Vice City Stories* are larger and more robust examples of a portable *GTA* experience. After all, they're near-perfect recreations of their PS2 brothers, while *Chinatown Wars* began life as a Nintendo DS title that played more like the original *GTA* from 1997. However, spend any amount of time with *Chinatown Wars* and you'll quickly realize next to nothing was sacrificed with this scaled-back presentation. It's chock full of everything that's made this series one of the most popular and widely acclaimed pieces of videogame culture.

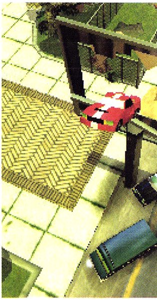
Let's start with the real star of any *GTA* game—the city. *Chinatown Wars* houses a stunningly accurate recreation of *GTA IV's* Liberty City, the same one you spent dozens of hours tearing through as Niko Bellic. Just about any landmark from PS3's Liberty City is here too, albeit a little cartoony and slightly pudgier (thanks to the distinct cel-shaded graphics). This includes the Statue of Happiness, Francis International Airport, and the garish Liberty Eye Ferris wheel on Firefly Island. You'll drive through the same crowded streets, suffer the same weather effects and "accidentally" plow through the same lines of unaware pedestrians as you would on PS3, just from a top-down view instead of a traditional behind-the-back angle. It makes for a thoroughly convincing, seemingly living city, despite the old-school look.

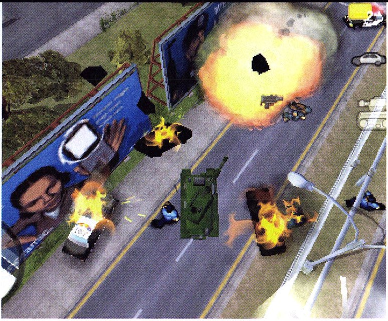
We only have two complaints with this mini-Liberty City. One, there's no island of Alderny, which eliminates roughly a third of the terrain found on PS3, and second, the frequency of cop cars patrolling the streets is extremely high. Just about any mission we tried to accomplish was punctuated with an unwanted chase because you can barely take a turn without bumping into an idling police car. Thankfully, evading police is much more handheld-friendly than other *GTA* titles. Instead of gunning it and attempting to escape a glowing Wanted zone, you can smash their cars into oncoming traffic or against any of the many walls or barricades. The higher your Wanted level, the more cars you have to destroy before returning to a police-free world. Oh, you can still outrun them if you like, but it's much faster (and more fun) to bash the crap out of your pursuers.

Big Trouble in Little China

You may be in the same city as Niko, but the cast is specifically Chinatown. You play as Huang Lee, the well-to-do son of a Triad mob boss. While delivering a family heirloom he's ambushed and left for dead, losing the item and his family's honor in one fell swoop. Thus begins Lee's penance as well as

It's not all running and gunning—there are tons of optional side-quests. Stunt jumps, in this case.





Tanks, helicopters, dozens of cars, even go-karts are at your beck and call.

Out on the Town

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE to thoroughly test a game's online performance before a game launches, but this list should give a good idea of what modes to expect. You can also connect to friends and trade money, items and favorite locations.

SINGLE RACE Exactly what it sounds like.

SEASON RACE Four tournaments of five races each.

STASH DASH Try to be the first to steal a van full of goods.

LIBERTY CITY SURVIVOR Adjustable deathmatching.

GANG BANG Swarm other players' turf, taking it over piece by piece

DEFEND THE BASE A co-op mode that has you protecting territory from waves of enemy gangs.

his slow ascension of the Triad crime ladder. Lee and the rest of the cast are flawed, vulgar people who crack the same F-bombs and tasteless sex jokes as any of the characters found in the console games, no punches pulled.

Unlike the *"Stories"* games, *Chinatown Wars* knows it's a portable game and its missions are designed to be short, not crammed versions of a lengthy PS2-sized outing. Even though they're intentionally brisk, mission variety is tops, with plenty of memorable sequences that we ran through more than once (also a series first) just for the sheer novelty. Our favorite by far has Lee dressed in a Chinese dragon costume, and acting as part of a parade to keep his cover.

There's also the ridiculously addictive drug-dealing economy that has you buying, dealing, and storing six types of illegal substances for your own profit. What initially seems like a tacked-on quest blossoms into a lucrative, just-one-more-deal obsession that lines your pockets with cash to spend on guns, armor, and multiple safe houses. Add the optional police, taxi, firefighter, and ambulance side-quests, plus online play and PSP-exclusive missions, and you have the strongest portable *GTA,* hands down.

Handheld Wars

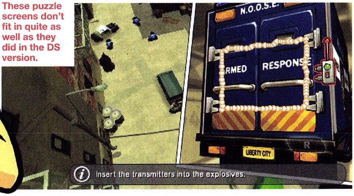
The transition to PSP has indeed enhanced the experience—new music complements the exceptional DS score (now including DFA, Anvil, and other licensed acts) and fancy lighting makes the city seem more tangible than before—but we have to say, control didn't transfer as well. Whereas the DS version used the touch screen to handle weapon selection, waypoint placement, and tons of mini-games (hotwiring cars, pumping gas, disarming bombs, etc.), the PSP version has to pack all those options onto a limited set of buttons. Even with different layouts, the controls suffer, often feeling convoluted (press Select for one effect, *hold* Select for another) and confusing. Lee himself also handles a bit stiffly and is frequently obscured by the terrain due to poor camera angles, though that was also the case in the DS edition.

Questionable controls aside, *Chinatown Wars* is a beautiful blend of the modern 3D games with the pick-up-and-play appeal of the '90s original. It's a remarkably (and deceptively) deep adventure that only adds to the growing empire that is *Grand Theft Auto,* and is so unique in execution we recommend it not only to franchise familiars, but to any PSP owner.

Brett Elston

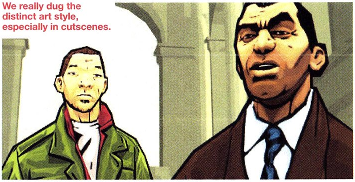
★★★★½

Strange... We're suddenly hungry for Chinese food.

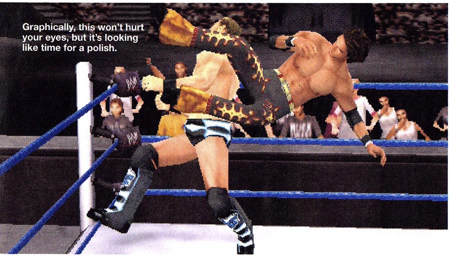


Insert the transmitters into the explosives.

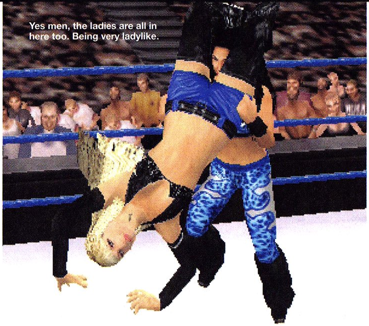
These puzzle screens don't fit in quite as well as they did in the DS version.



We really dug the distinct art style, especially in cutscenes.



Graphically, this won't hurt your eyes, but it's looking like time for a polish.



Yes men, the ladies are all in here too. Being very ladylike.

WWE SmackDown vs. Raw 2010

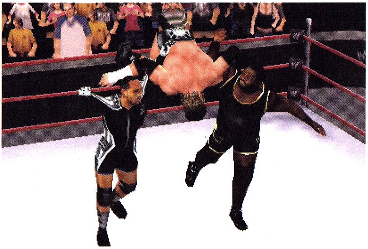
Slam on the run

PSP PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Yuke's

PSP | R

Just like Wrestlemania or Summerslam, a new *SmackDown vs. Raw* comes around every year. And just like those events, some are better than others. Even though *WWE SVR 2010* is an overall improvement for the series in general, the PSP version doesn't include quite as many upgrades as this year's PS3 *SVR*. Plus, it's starting to show its age in the looks department.

The core wrestling got an update this year, with the HUD moved down by the wrestler's feet and the helpful button commands now appearing over their heads. It makes matches apeear more life-like, even if the 60-plus brawlers are beginning to look noticeably jaggy, to say nothing of the hideously rendered audience. Additionally, reversals have been helpfully simplified, with the R-button reversing strikes and grapples now. Added up, it both makes it easier for newer grapplers to keep up and also keeps things familiar for old hands of the game.



It was at that exact moment that Harold realized the jump-rope routine had somehow gone horribly, horribly wrong.

But the load times on our UMD version are still the bane of the series—a frustrating impasse to enjoying the matches. It's actually improved, but still not good enough. And the waits come often: between cutscenes, before and after an entrance, after pressing Start on the menu... Sure, you can turn off entrances and other features to speed up the process, but it still feels like an eternity before you can actually lock up with an opponent. And really, you shouldn't have to turn features off to achieve decent performance.

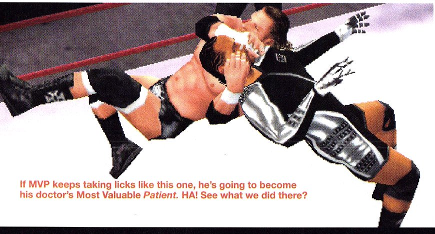
That said, the annoyances are worth braving for the improvements to the already engrossing play modes. Not only have the captivating Road to Wrestlemania story campaigns returned, but they now include paths for Divas and created wrestlers. All the old match types are back, including a much improved and more exciting Royal Rumble, and the tense Championship Scramble event is a welcome addition.

And though this portable offering can't handle the huge online community features of the PS3 version, it still has most of the new modes and creator improvements. Whether designing a custom story, finisher, or wrestler, there are many more options available to the more creatively inclined grappler.

Overall, *SVR* on PSP remains a fun time, and it's unfair to expect a handheld offering to measure up to its console counterpart. So, in the context of a portable game, it's a good ol' slobber-knocker. But unless you're on the road often or lack a PS3, this one's not quite championship material.

Henry Gilbert

★★★½



If MVP keeps taking licks like this one, he's going to become his doctor's Most Valuable *Patient*. HA! See what we did there?

TEKKEN 6
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TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Alcohol Reference
Crude Humor
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence

PlayStation PlayStation Network XBOX 360 XBOX LIVE gamesradar BANDAI NAMCO Games

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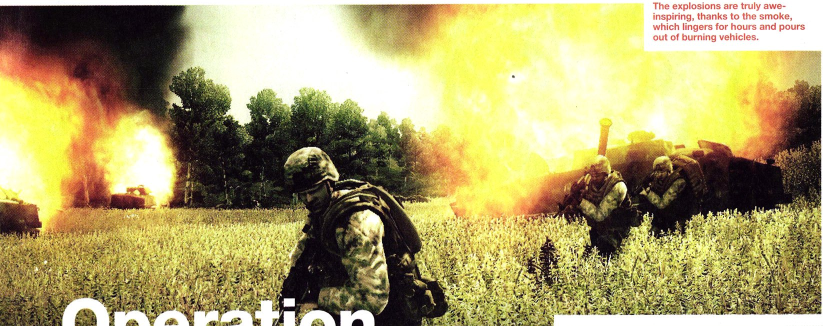


The explosions are truly awe-inspiring, thanks to the smoke, which lingers for hours and pours out of burning vehicles.

Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising

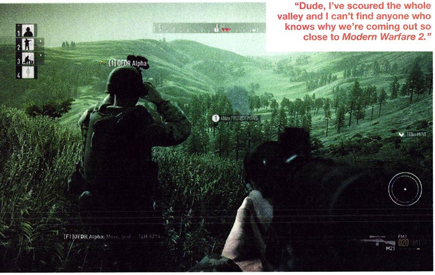
The loadouts are all 100-percent accurate. You'll think twice about pulling the trigger because you can literally run out of bullets.

More realistic and intense than *Call of Duty*

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: Codemasters DEVELOPER: Codemasters Studios

PS3 | R

Operation Flashpoint is about war. Not the summer-popcorn-movie kind of war. Forget about being funneled down a singular track as everything explodes all around you. It's about being in the middle of an unpredictable, dangerous warzone, planning an assault and adjusting strategies and tactics on the fly. Bullets aren't just a minor inconvenience (there's no recharging health on a real-life battlefield). Crouch behind cover after getting shot and you'll bleed to death unless you call for a medic or patch yourself up with a bandage (in which case, you could still end up slowed down by a limp).



"Dude, I've scoured the whole valley and I can't find anyone who knows why we're coming out so close to *Modern Warfare 2.*"

In the quiet moments before it all kicks off, you'll be discussing entry points, flanking maneuvers, weapon loadouts, and air support with a few friends (*Operation Flashpoint* can, and should, be played entirely in co-op). A few minutes later, you'll be pacing down a hillside and spraying suppressing fire as a teammate lines up his crosshairs on an enemy 200-meters away. It's this juxtaposition of strategy, dexterity, and realism that makes *Operation Flashpoint* feel so refreshing.

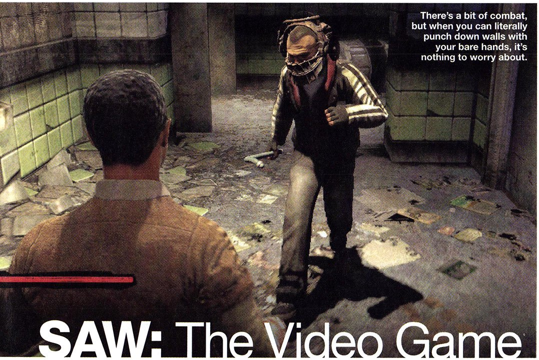
But there's a price for this depth of simulation. The draw distance is extraordinary, but if you've been spoiled by *Killzone 2*, *Uncharted*, or *CoD*, you'll notice a downgrade in texture detail and animation quality. Similarly, every building can be flattened by an artillery barrage or air strike, but you might feel a bit underwhelmed when a wooden door remains standing after being rifle-grenaded.

Then there's the AI; it gets the big things right such as flanking maneuvers or tactical retreats, but on the rare occasion, it failed to spot us waving our rifle a few meters in front of a soldier's face. The learning curve is crazy-steep, in part because some of the simplest and most commonly used commands are hidden under three sequential button-presses. We shouldn't need to enter the equivalent of a *Mortal Kombat* fatality to call for a medic. It's handy that you can use the map screen to order your team about for some of the more complex commands, but the initial clunkiness remains.

Still, these are minor issues in a title that's making a real effort to broaden the scope of the console FPS. If you've got a few friends willing to try a more cerebral battle, this is an essential purchase. *Operation Flashpoint* isn't as instantly gratifying as *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield: Bad Company,* but give it time and you'll appreciate its unique flavor of war.

Owen Hill

★★★★



There's a bit of combat, but when you can literally punch down walls with your bare hands, it's nothing to worry about.

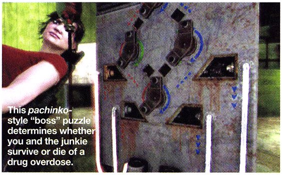
SAW: The Video Game

A puzzling lack of horror

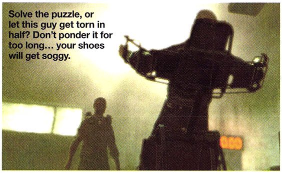
PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Mature PUBLISHER: Konami DEVELOPER: Zombie studios

Based upon the gory horror movie franchise, *SAW* is a remarkably good puzzle game with a license that it actually doesn't need. As the original film's Detective Tapp, you explore a rotting, derelict asylum in an attempt to first escape and then hunt down the murderous villain, Jigsaw.

Still, despite the creepy setting and multiple "Do I really need to stick my hand in there?" moments, this isn't quite *Silent Hill.* Yes, you'll have to fend off plenty of murderous enemies (often victims like you, forced to fight), but puzzles are the pleasure here whether you're arranging gears to open a mechanical box, picking locks with nails, or rewiring circuits.



This *pachinko*-style "boss" puzzle determines whether you and the junkie survive or die of a drug overdose.



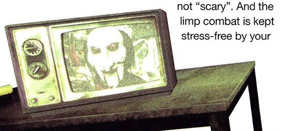
Solve the puzzle, or let this guy get torn in half? Don't ponder it for too long… your shoes will get soggy.

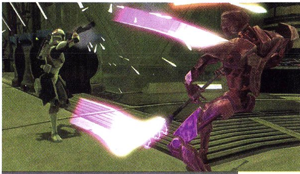
Each "level" leads up to one big, unique puzzle: a helpless victim, stuck in one of Jigsaw's elaborate torture-until-dead machines. It turns out all these victims have done something bad, so they're not exactly innocent, and you determine their fate. Solve the puzzle (i.e. guiding an antidote for poison into their I.V. drip or moving a peg through a maze) and they live. Fail or choose not to solve it, and they die horribly.

SAW is clearly morbid, but it's not frightening. The puzzles are tense, darkly lit, and bloody, but not "scary". And the limp combat is kept stress-free by your thermonuclear warhead-like fists—you punch so well, using one of the game's various weapons may actually slow you down. Instead, most of your deaths will come from frustrating booby trap insta-kills, like a door that triggers a rigged shotgun. So you reload, watch for the "avoid" button to pop up a split-second before the trap springs, slam it, and continue, annoyed but not scared. That's the perfect example of how *SAW's* horror-swagger gets in the way of what really is a nice little puzzle game.

Patrick Joynt

★★★





This would look better in LEGO form, wouldn't it?

Star Wars The Clone Wars: Republic Heroes

I sense...suffering.

PS3 PRICE: $49.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: LucasArts DEVELOPER: Krome Studios

Republic Heroes has none of the fun or maturity of its source, the cartoon *Star Wars: The Clone Wars.* This cash-in title lets you play solo or co-op as various superstar Jedi or, depending on the level, their clone trooper soldiers. None of the levels will enable you to play someone fun.

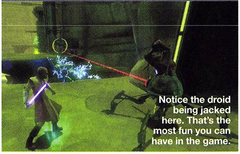
The Jedi fight with lightsabers and the Force. The clone troopers tear through the droid opposition with a variety of blasters and explosive secondary weapons. The only fun is when, as a Jedi, you take over droids. The highlights of a game where you can play Plo Kloon should not be when you play as a "jacked" Droid.

The camera and controls create an unforgivably choppy mess of a game. You'll never quite know where you are, or what you're doing. It seems co-op centric, but there's no real value to having a second player. Combat is easy regardless, and the platforming is full of cheap falling deaths for one or two players.

LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga does co-op better and it's more fun. Don't fall for *Republic Heroes'* marketing mind trick: This is not the game you're looking for.

Patrick Joynt

★★



Notice the droid being jacked here. That's the most fun you can have in the game.

Tekken 6

There are a staggering 42 playable characters now, with dozens upon dozens of costumes.

Namco's fighter returns bigger, but not necessarily better

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai DEVELOPER: Namco Bandai

PS3 | R

Tekken is has grown more and more outlandish as the years have gone by. It's increasingly filled with animals, wooden men, and robots. Since day one, the *Tekken* team's answer to everything has been "more," with no limit on the amount of *stuff* they're prepared to throw at the series—but it's getting bloated. For example, *Tekken 6* tosses in several new fighters, increasing the total character count to a daunting 42. And even though we're hot for smouldering assassin Zafina, we've got to admit it's starting to feel a bit ridiculous.

The new characters aren't the biggest change, though. Rage mode is. Our favorite tweak (and also the sole concession to new players), Rage Mode kicks in when your health gets low, making your strikes more powerful and thereby rendering a weakened opponent more dangerous.

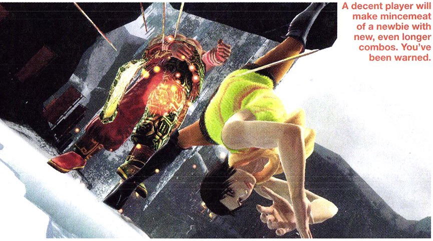
Outside of Rage mode, we found ourselves conflicted. We were overwhelmed by the feeling that this is too much of the same old *Tekken*—badly in need of a complete overhaul. But we also disapprove of the few changes that *have* been made. They all seem either aimless or specifically designed to make the game more hardcore and less accessible. For instance, fan favorites Yoshimitsu and Law are more complex now, suitable only for advanced players. And although the fighting system is the same familiar mix of strategy and smarts buried beneath layers of complex execution-intensive combos, it places an even greater emphasis on stick-thrashing mega-chains. New moves will bounce characters off the floor for extended attack flurries that will enable a veteran *Tekken* player to juggle an amateur's health bar to 50-percent in just a few helpless seconds.

Tekken 6 also marks the return of Tekken Force mode, Namco's take on the scrolling beat-'em-up. So much work has been invested in crafting lengthy cutscenes, custom-built stages, weapons, and characters for what is basically a throwaway bonus mode that we actually wondered if we should be blaming it for the lack of innovation. Is the main game stale because the dev team is so absorbed with Tekken Force?

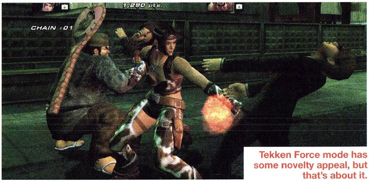
In spite of all these concerns, we don't want to come off as overly harsh: *Tekken 6* is still a solid fighter and an improvement on its predecessor. The trouble is that *Tekken: Dark Resurrection* still feels like enough, especially at its bargain price. *Street Fighter IV* provided the model—it's time for *Tekken* to take some time and reinvent itself as well.

Mike Gapper

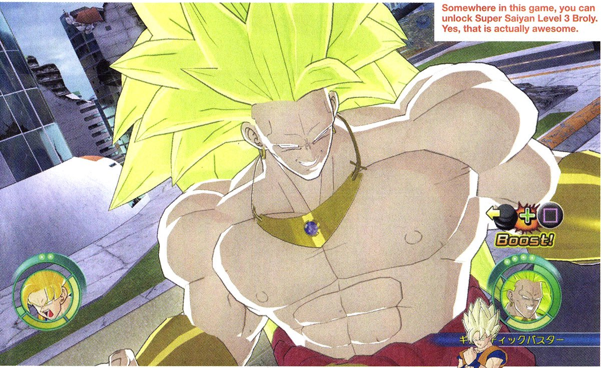
★★★½



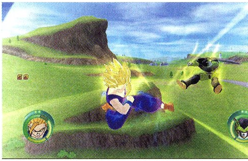
A decent player will make mincemeat of a newbie with new, even longer combos. You've been warned.



Tekken Force mode has some novelty appeal, but that's about it.



Somewhere in this game, you can unlock Super Saiyan Level 3 Broly. Yes, that is actually awesome.



The battlefields are impressively huge, enabling you to fly while fighting.

"Only 70 characters? What a rip-off!" No seriously, someone is saying that right now as they read this.

▶ The graphics aren't quite as stunning as we'd hoped, but the light show is 4th of July good.

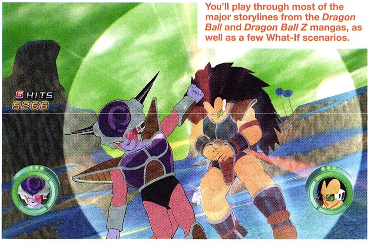
Dragon Ball: Raging Blast

Kamehameha! If you don't get that reference, keep moving

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai DEVELOPER: Spike

Dragon Ball: Raging Blast continues the fine traditions of the *Budokai Tenkaichi* titles that spawned it. There are a lot of *DBZ* characters, plenty of exploration of the *DBZ* canon, punishing split-second combat...and no real changes from the last game in the series. This is the first next-generation romp from *Budokai* developers Spike (Last year's *Burst Limit* was developed by Dimps), and aside from slightly spiffed-up graphics, it feels very familiar.

Familiar, with one possible exception: This year's game is online, a first for the series. However, because online play wasn't enabled in time for this review, we can't tell you how well it works. If online play will make or break *Raging Blast* for you, better rent first.



You'll play through most of the major storylines from the *Dragon Ball* and *Dragon Ball Z* mangas, as well as a few What-If scenarios.

Even offline, there's still plenty to do in *Raging Blast.* There are 70 characters, including transformations (which is actually fewer than in *Budokai 3).* The story mode, called "Dragon Battle Collection," covers the Saiyan, Frieza, Bardock, Androids, Majin Buu, and Legendary Super Saiyan storylines from the *DBZ* comics, and there are also some What-If scenarios to dig into. Presentation and storytelling feel a bit thin, but this title isn't for people who need the recap. It's for people who already have strong feelings about Tien abandoning the Crane School.

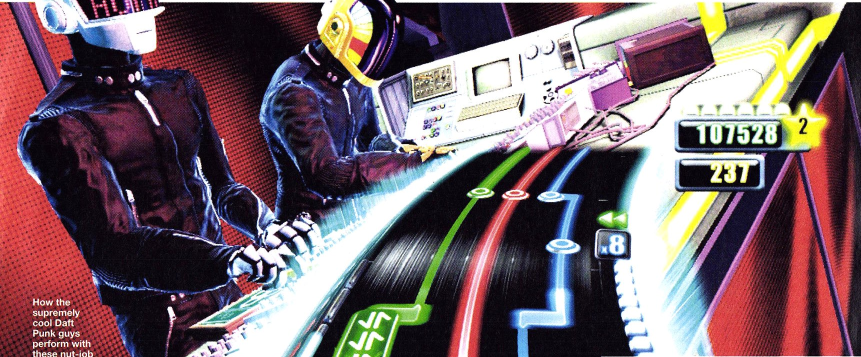
Tournament mode lets you fight in tiered competitions. The mandatory Versus mode lets you smash a real or CPU friend through the game's big, marginally destructible, levels. Level design is very vertically open, accommodating the game's "Super Rising" attacks. These connect to another set of split-second choices that will win or lose a round of hits, but don't drastically change the game.

But first, you'll need to put in long hours in the training dojo to get over the initial difficulty of the game's combat mechanics. Throughout the game, you'll earn points to unlock costumes, story bits, special moves, and a plethora of other elements to customize your fighter of choice. It's not quite building your own character from scratch, but it's nice.

So, barring the possible glory or failure of *Raging Blast's* online mode, this is a rather predictable entry in the tale of Goku and Gohan. That's not necessarily an awful thing—there are plenty of hardcore *DBZ* fans who will find this comfortable and familiar (one is writing this review). But because *Raging Blast* is aimed squarely at those rabid *DBZ* lovers, those gamers who don't know the difference between Vegetto and Gogeta are likely to come away bewildered and unsatisfied.

Patrick Joynt

★★★

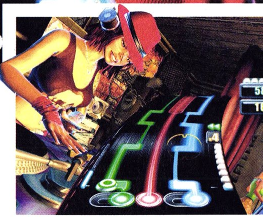


How the supremely cool Daft Punk guys perform with these nut-job helmets on, we'll never know. Maybe they *really* are androids.

DJ Hero

A costly-but-classy *Guitar Hero* for the dance club crowd

PS3 PRICE: $119.99 (with turntable) ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: FreeStyleGames



Don't be fooled by the fact that there are only three note tracks. There are five difficulty settings, and you *will* be challenged.

PS3 | R

A cynical reader might think we're too easily won over by pretty plastic toys. And perhaps that's true: the *DJ Hero* controller is *really* cool, with an elegant design that responds well both in terms of tactile feel and in-game accuracy. Though we keep thinking the genre is getting stale, if the peripherals—and more importantly, the *games* that use them—stay this good, we'll gladly shell out our money for *"Kazoo Hero"* when it inevitably gets made.

DJ Hero breathes life into the *Hero* games not so much by reinventing the *Guitar Hero* formula, but rather by changing up the music and the whole cultural vibe. You'll still press buttons and perform commands to the beat for points, and you'll still trigger Star Power (now called "Euphoria") for score multipliers, but you'll be doing all that to music that showcases the best of the DJing scene.

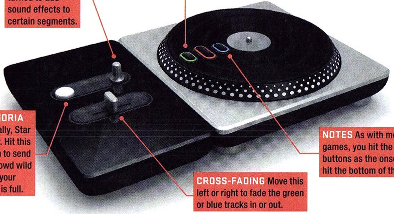
The game's 90-plus mixes typically involve two well-known tracks that have been mashed-up together (although there are some standalone tracks as well). Which tunes turn you on will be a matter of personal taste, to be sure—Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby" and MC Hammer's "Can't Touch This" worked great together, but we could do without Eminem's "My Name Is" mixed with Beck's "Loser." Still, all the tunes groove, and we dig 'em. The two-turntable multiplayer is great fun, but don't play the "DJ Hero vs. Guitar Hero" mode, though. Playing a plastic guitar alongside your slick turntable kind of kills the game's vibe.

In fact, we're wondering if the holdover elements of previous *Guitar Hero* games are actually bringing *DJ Hero* down a bit. You still earn stars based on your performance in each song, which unlock new venues, characters, and decks. But the difficulty level doesn't affect your overall star count. As a result, though amateurs will be able to see everything the game has to offer, pros won't feel as rewarded for nailing five stars on Expert, because they can get the same prize for doing it on Beginner.

Still, these are minor gripes. If you can swing the $120 for the whole package, go for it—it may not be exactly like real DJing, but if you're into the scene, it's a helluva good time.

James Coates

★★★★½



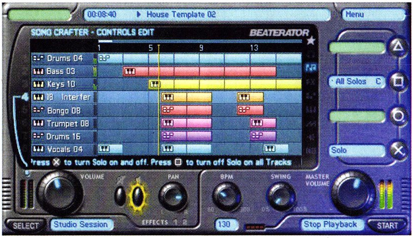
EFFECTS Like a guitar's whammy bar, this can be turned to add sound effects to certain segments.

SCRATCHING Sometimes, you'll have to hold a button down for a time and move the turntable to "scratch" the track. On higher difficulties, you must scratch in a specific direction.

EUPHORIA Basically, Star Power. Hit this button to send the crowd wild when your meter is full.

NOTES As with most rhythm games, you hit the colored buttons as the onscreen gems hit the bottom of the screen.

CROSS-FADING Move this left or right to fade the green or blue tracks in or out.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START

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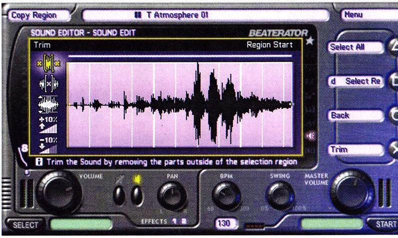
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SWING
MASTER VOLUME
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EFFECTS 1 2
130
START

Trim the Sound by removing the parts outside of the selection region

You can actually edit each sound individually. Sure, it's work, but a single bad sample can ruin a song.

Beaterator

Borrow über-producer Timbaland's beats and make them your own

PSP PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: Rockstar Games DEVELOPER: Rockstar Leeds

Not a game so much as an electronic music factory, *Beaterator* is both ambitious and a bit schizophrenic. Sure, it wants to attract casual gamers, but it also wants to please dedicated musicians spoiled by top-of-the-line production software.

Casual gamers will enjoy messing around in Live Play mode, tinkering with the premade loops and beats—*Beaterator's* interface is definitely one of the more user-friendly we've seen. However, the fun of Live Play wears off quickly, and with no goals or interactive tutorials, the non-musical crowd likely won't stick around to unearth all the game has to offer.

However, music gurus will find *Beaterator's* feature set extremely impressive for a portable digital audio workstation, enabling multiple audio filters on each track, time stretching of audio clips, and easy exporting of songs as .WAV files. And yet, too many of the game's instruments sound artificial and robotic, and you can't program tempo or time signature changes mid-song. We found ourselves fighting *Beaterator's* interface more than we'd have liked, but hey, at least we were able to make some decent-sounding tunes to play on our PSPs and iPods.

Joe Newman

★★★★

Astro Boy: The Video Game

A kiddie movie bolts together a kiddie game

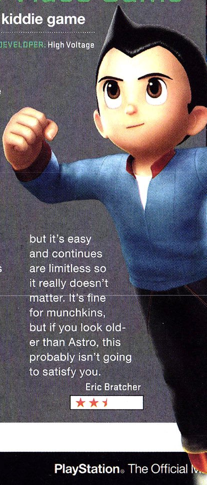
PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+ PUBLISHER: D3 DEVELOPER: High Voltage

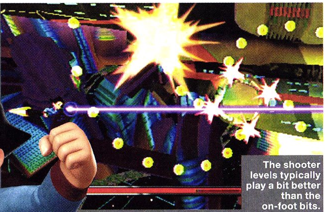
What attracts you to *Astro Boy: The Video Game?* A love for the original *Astro Boy* manga? An interest in the new film? A mistaken belief that this is the sequel to 2004's excellent Game Boy Advance game *Astro Boy: Omega Factor?* (It isn't.) Maybe even the fact that Astro has a machine gun in his butt? Whatever your reason, the end result is the same—this is a typical movie-licensed game.

Astro Boy: The Video Game follows the events of the film, it's simplistic enough for even the youngest players, and it looks and plays okay, but not great. Gameplay alternates between side-scrolling shooter levels focusing on Astro's rocket feet and finger laser, and side-scrolling beat-'em-up levels that keep the laser and add in some jumping, martial arts moves, and the aforementioned butt gun. Neither play-style feels incredibly polished or balanced and the controls can be wonky, but it's easy and continues are limitless so it really doesn't matter. It's fine for munchkins, but if you look older than Astro, this probably isn't going to satisfy you.

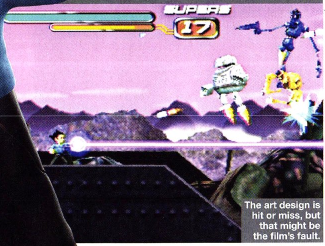
Eric Bratcher

★★½





The shooter levels typically play a bit better than the on-foot bits.



The art design is hit or miss, but that might be the film's fault.

Fire it up! Jak and Daxter have plenty of new moves and tricks, but large guns are still a good means to an end.

Jak and Daxter: The Lost Frontier

The digital odd couple's PSP return is worth finding

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+ PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: High Impact

PSP | R

Original developer Naughty Dog isn't at the helm of *Jak and Daxter: The Lost Frontier,* but it's hardly noticeable. Developer High Impact *(Secret Agent Clank)* broadens the amusing duo's series with a smart smattering of everything: flying combat, eco-infused Daxter missions, open-world exploration, mini-games, and a hefty dose of RPG-esque customization. The best part? *Lost Frontier* feels like a full-fledged console game.

The fourth game in the main series (not counting Daxter's solo PSP outing or the combat racing game), *Lost Frontier* finds Jak, Daxter, and cutie-pie mechanic Kiera exploring the edge of the known world, in search of their world's fuel, eco. Their planet has collapsed into an airborne *Mad Max*-apocalypse, in which the skies are filled with fighting planes and mercenaries ruthlessly compete to find the last remaining remnants of eco. Out of desperation, Jak and crew are forced to work with morally bankrupt sky pirates to help find a way to convert dark eco into light eco, giving Jak a palette of new eco powers to wield.

Even with the PSP's imperfect analog nub, the controls are tight and responsive, making the flight combat levels (nearly half the game) a white-knuckle joy. Daxter's wisecracks are less forced and occur less often, making his brand of lowbrow humor more tolerable. And Daxter's solo levels, especially when he becomes the hulking "Dark Daxter," add color and break up the repetition. The on-foot platforming and shooting are still top-notch and, overall, the game feels smartly designed.

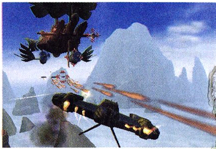
Lost Frontier also turns up customization to 11. Jak can upgrade his trusty blaster (rifle), scatter gun (shotgun), Vulcan Futy (heavy machine gun), and the lobber (grenade launcher). And Jak's Hellcat aircraft (as well as the four other aircraft he finds) is also upgradable using eco as currency to improve maneuverability, speed, weaponry, and armor. In addition to all the heavy weaponry, Jak has six eco powers that can slow time, beam him to new locations, and call up green shards to help cross chasms, among other abilities. This helps open up gameplay, offers different attack options, and modernizes the series.

We'll admit *Lost Frontier* isn't without issues. Time-based platform puzzles coupled with poor lighting and preventative camera angles will force you to take leaps of faith into dark voids, resulting in frustration when you plummet to your doom. But ultimately, our biggest complaint about *Lost Frontier* is that it's been stuffed onto the PSP— with a little graphical polish and some expansion, it could have been a full-fledged PS3 title. Of course, that won't be a problem for PSP owners looking for a solid game.

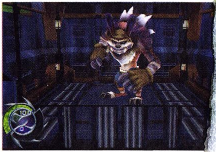
Douglass C. Perry

★★★★

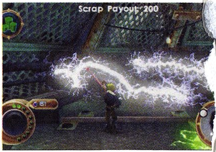
Kiera must love being a mechanic, because she's really too adorable to hang out with a moody guy who's best friend is a loudmouthed quasi-ferret.



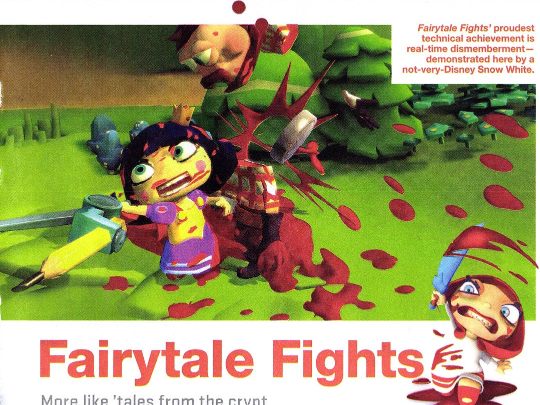
Nearly half the game is aerial missions, in which you fly a highly customizable plane—that's new.



Dark Daxter is more about bashing heads than flapping gums. We prefer him over the normal Daxter, actually.



A sizeable chunk of the game is still spent exploring the world in third-person—but with brand new powers and weapons.



Fairytale Fights' proudest technical achievement is real-time dismemberment—demonstrated here by a not-very-Disney Snow White.

Fairytale Fights

More like 'tales from the crypt

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Mature
PUBLISHER: Playlogic Ent. DEVELOPER: Playlogic Game Factory

Fairytale Fights casts you as Little Red Riding Hood, who along with Snow White, the Naked Emperor, and Beanstalk Jack, realize they've been robbed of fame and fortune. Little Boy Taylor has hired a giant to remove their stories from fairytale land, forcing you to earn it all back. How? By grabbing the nearest thing heavy or pointy enough to be used as a killing tool and going on a blood-drenched slaughterfest. It's Mother Goose rewritten by the Happy Tree Friends after a *SAW* marathon.

The initial presentation is superb. *Fairytale Fights* elegantly contrasts saccharine-sweet country tunes and slow club jazz with a cartoon Little Red getting 45-hit combos as she slices the limbs off dozens of evil bunnies, beavers, and gingerbread men, splattering pools of gooey blood across the landscape. It's unorthodox and violent, but delivered with a whimsical humor and simplistic art style that's not to be mistaken for seriousness.

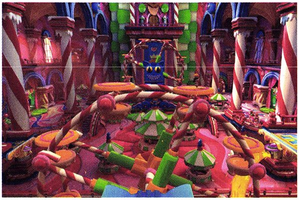
You'll wield some 140 weapons, including rakes, clubs, sticks, muskets, and knives, but there's not much variation in their actual use. The axe and the chainsaw are our two favorites. Mince up an enemy with an axe and you'll receive a certain evil chill; you can even skate in the pool of blood they left behind.

While the Quest mode is decent fun played alone, *Fairytale Fights* is clearly designed as a multiplayer hack-'em-up. Up to four can play offline, two online, in either Quest or other MP modes.

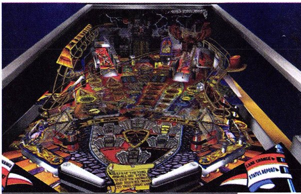
But this story ends badly. *Fairytales Fights* defeats itself with tons of little niggling issues. You'll quickly realize it's sloppily executed, from frustrating camera angles that hide death traps, to edges you can combo right over, to poor controls that work for basic hacking, but stink for platforming. In the end, the game's novelty and substance wear thin quickly. Fairytales after all, are usually very short stories.

Douglass C. Perry

★★½



The levels look stunning, but bad camera angles and imprecise controls make maneuvering a frustrating chore.



Medieval Madness has a model castle along with a dragon and working drawbridge.

Pinball Hall of Fame: Williams Edition

A real trip down memory lane—if you're old enough to care

PS3 PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+
PUBLISHER: Crave DEVELOPER: FarSight Studios

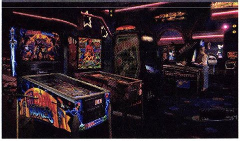
It's the way the ball moves. That's what *Pinball Hall of Fame: Williams Edition* does better than everybody else. Most pinbal videogames fudge the physics, so the ball's mass feels slightly wrong, it doesn't ricochet off the pop bumpers exactly right, or its velocity doesn't vary quite as it should. It's a subtle thing, but pinball lovers always notice.

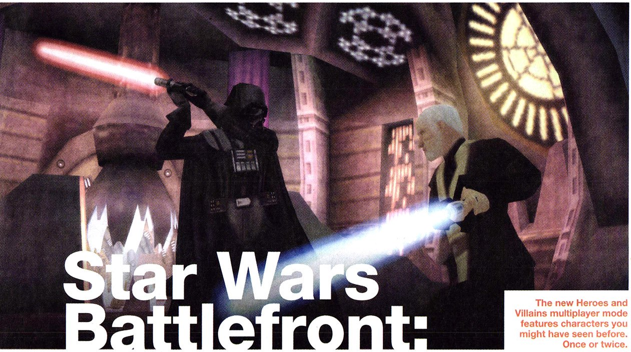
Already out for PS2 and PSP, this collection of classic pinball tables hits PS3 with two upgrades. First, there are now 13 tables, including the newly added No Good Gophers, Medieval Madness, and Arabian Nights—all but one unlocked from the start. Second, the graphics are full HD—though they should be even better. Transparent surfaces need work, and the lighting is odd, as if the game is swapping out a "lit" and "unlit" texture rather than actually flashing a light source for each bulb. It all looks a bit flat. Real pinball tables are works of art—why not let the PS3 do them justice?

But that's nit-picking. If you play the silver ball, you don't just want this game, you need it.

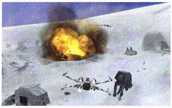
Eric Bratcher

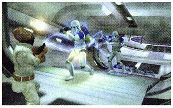
★★★★

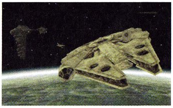




The new Heroes and Villains multiplayer mode features characters you might have seen before. Once or twice.







The beauty of this game is that you can conceivably go from ground to air to space, all in the same mission.

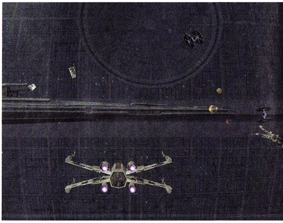
Star Wars Battlefront: Elite Squadron

The online shooter the PS3 has been waiting for arrives...on PSP

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Teen PUBLISHER: LucasArts DEVELOPER: Rebellion

The *Star Wars Battlefront* franchise may be AWOL on PS3, but the series' second PSP-exclusive offering delivers the twist we've been dreaming of since day one: connected battlefields. That means you can start off using blasters and lightsabers to make smoking holes in the other guy on the surface, then hop in a vacant spaceship and switch to lasering your way through interplanetary dogfights in the inky blackness above. Then head planet-side again or stay in space—whatever you like.

It's not completely seamless—you'll see a brief cinematic between transitions—but it opens up the battlefield significantly. For example, if you control the command post next to an Ion cannon, you can blast away the shields of an enemy cruiser in space, then jet up to that newly vulnerable leviathan and detonate it from the inside—all while your teammates rack up points blasting enemy fighters in the atmosphere and carving up foes with lightsabers on the ground. How freakin' badass is that?



The 16-player online multiplayer battles remain the highlight of the *Battlefront* series. Aside from the usual Capture the Flag and Domination variants, which are honed to near-perfection, you'll find one other new online mode: Heroes and Villains, a Team Deathmatch option in which each side is made up of only the best units, like Darth Vader and Yoda.

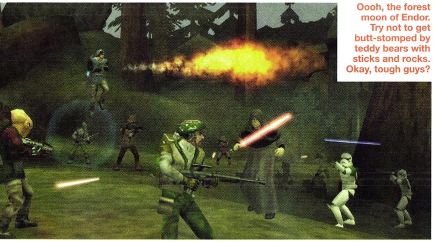
But if you're not planning on taking the game fully online, it's much harder to find reasons to recommend *Elite Squadron.* The single-player campaign is more varied and sports better production values than the first game in the series *(Renegade Squadron),* but story-wise it's mostly a snoozer, with dull missions and rote objectives. The single-player skirmish mode fakes 16-players admirably, but it's too easy. And Local Ad hoc multiplayer oddly still limits combat to a single area, ignoring the multi-layered battlefields of the other modes.

Another, lesser downside is that the action in Elite Squadron remains fairly simplistic and lingering camera/control issues sometimes interfere (insert yet another lament that PSP has only one analog stick [here]). But customizable characters and weaponry help, and if you're a *Star Wars* fan, the sheer amount of fan service on display here is stunning.

Ultimately, if you find yourself firing up the previous *Battlefront* for online skirmishes, *Elite Squadron* should satiate your need for something slightly new. After all, its biggest problem isn't really a problem at all: it's that the game reminds us how badly we want to be playing this series on PlayStation 3, with a proper, two-stick controller, destructible environments and all the graphical eye candy cranked to eleventy. How about it LucasArts?

Andrew Hayward

★★★½

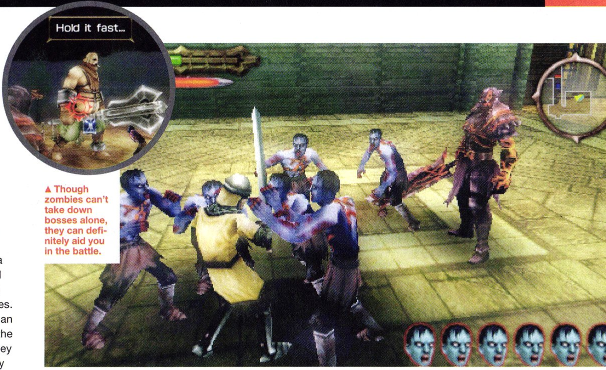


Oooh, the forest moon of Endor. Try not to get butt-stomped by teddy bears with sticks and rocks. Okay, tough guys?

Undead Knights

Spruce up your hacking and slashing with a zombie army

PSP PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Mature
PUBLISHER: Tecmo DEVELOPER: Tecmo



▲ Though zombies can't take down bosses alone, they can definitely aid you in the battle.

When you've got a bunch of zombies doing your dirty work, you can focus on just looking all cool and Death Knight-y.

Undead Knights is a hack-and-slash actioner that plays like a fusion of *Overlord* and *Dynasty Warriors.* As a family of three undead heroes, all murdered by an unjust king, the goal is to capture the throne by slaughtering everything that moves. So far, so typical, but there's a twist: When an enemy is near death, you can grab him by the face and turn him into a zombie that will obey your every command. Thus, you can quickly amass a small herd of undead underlings, just waiting to do your evil bidding.

Zombies can rip enemies to gibs in a bloody dogpile, run *Kamikaze*-style into flaming ramparts, bash open gates, climb onto a boss to hold it still, or use their own bodies to form a living (rather, unliving) bridge over a chasm. You can even grab one and carry it in front of you like a shield. And of course, your chosen character isn't exactly helpless. You've always got your own attacks, and can earn more at the end of each level by trading in the souls of those you've slaughtered.

As a *Dynasty Warriors*-clone, *Undead Knights* freshens things up a bit, but the zombies aren't quite as funny or as strategically implemented as they could be, and the controls can make it tough to face-grab a particular enemy. But it looks good, and the blood and gore fly freely to a relentless heavy metal soundtrack that seems apropos. It's mindless fun, but fun nonetheless.

Doug Trueman

★★★

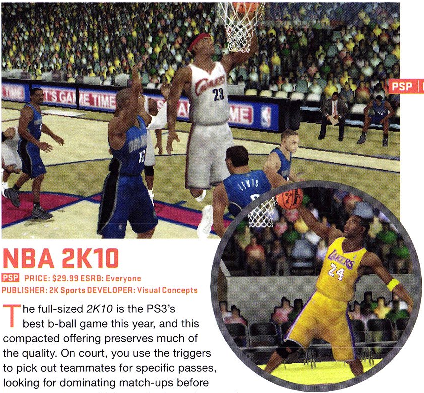
Star Wars The Clone Wars: Republic Heroes

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Teen
PUBLISHER: LucasArts DEVELOPER: Krome Studios

The PSP version of this third-person actioner, in which you play as lightsaber-wielding Jedi and blaster-packing clone troopers, is worse than the already broken next-gen title. Camera, controls, and graphics all struggle, but the most painful omission is the lack of co-op support. Based off the PS3 version, the game is still designed around co-op play, but you can't actually have a friend play with you. In a game this charmless and ugly, that's almost a positive.

Patrick Joynt

★½



NBA 2K10

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Everyone
PUBLISHER: 2K Sports DEVELOPER: Visual Concepts

The full-sized *2K10* is the PS3's best b-ball game this year, and this compacted offering preserves much of the quality. On court, you use the triggers to pick out teammates for specific passes, looking for dominating match-ups before timing the shot or driving to the hoop for a well-animated signature dunk. It's not crammed with features, but playing through a franchise—with drills and practice—will keep hoops fans entertained and occupied on the road.

Rob Smith

★★★★

Player likenesses are beautiful this year, far better even than competitor *FIFA's.*

Pro Evolution Soccer 2010

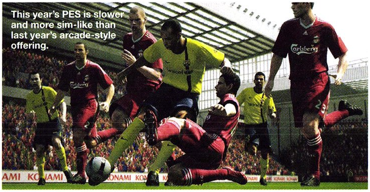
PES remembers its sim-pler side

PS3 PRICE: $59.99 ESRB: Everyone PUBLISHER: Konami DEVELOPER: Konami

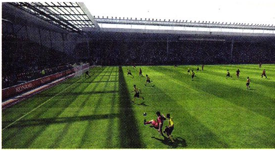
PS3 | R

So, you're a soccer nut, you've always stuck with the *Pro Evolution Soccer* games, but lately you've been thinking about switching to *FIFA.* Maybe you even committed some "indiscretions" with *FIFA* when the disappointing *PES 09* hit shelves last year. Well, *PES 2010* is trying to win you back, you adulterer you. It's prettier than before (which should be expected), and there are some notable new features—but it may not be quite fresh enough to tear you away from *FIFA 10.*

First, we should note what *PES 2010* does better than its EA competition. Player likenesses in *PES 2010* are astounding, making the already impressive-looking players in *FIFA 10* look like zombies. Even lesser-known players like Andy Reid and Federico Macheda look great, and dedicated *FIFA* fans will gaze at the player models in *PES 2010* and feel, well, a bit jealous. Additionally, *PES 2010's* controls feel more precise than *FIFA 10's,* even if the overall pace of the game is slower.



This year's PES is slower and more sim-like than last year's arcade-style offering.



If you're more into single-player Master League action, this may be a better choice than the more casual *FIFA 10.*

With slower game speed, however, comes a different set of tactics. Rarely will you be able to dribble past a defenseman with anyone but the trickiest of players (folks like Nani, Messi, or Rolando), forcing you to rely more on your passing game. Even so, tricks like the Shot Fake or Long Step can really throw off the game's balance. Compared to *FIFA's* more demanding Skill Moves, *PES 2010's* tricks are far too easy to pull off—in the hands of an experienced player, they feel more like cheats than legitimate strategies. Furthermore, as good as the player likenesses are, the field looks bland from a distance, and as precise as the controls are, the gameplay feels more robotic than the smooth *FIFA 10.*

But there's room at this party for everyone. *FIFA 10* is the slightly more appealing soccer sim this year, but on its own, *PES 2010* is still quite an achievement. Sure, the licensing might not be perfect (actually, only about 80-percent of the Champions League teams are accurate, though you can customize them into proper form), and there aren't any sweeping changes to the gameplay or the Master League, but a ton of little tweaks make *PES 2010* an extremely fun and tactically deep soccer sim. *PES* may not be evolving at the same rate as its competition, but that makes it comfortable and familiar. Don't forget about it just because *FIFA 10* seems fresher.

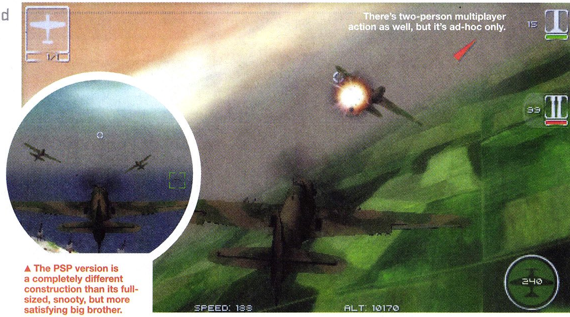
James Coates

★★★★½

IL-2 Sturmovik: Birds of Prey

Air combat needn't be complicated

PSP PRICE: $29.99 ESRB: Teen
PUBLISHER: 505 Games DEVELOPER: SME Dynamic Systems



There's two-person multiplayer action as well, but it's ad-hoc only.

▲ The PSP version is a completely different construction than its full-sized, snooty, but more satisfying big brother.

More than anything, the PSP version of *IL-2 Sturmovik: Birds of Prey* is a surprise. The *IL-2* series carries expectations of a hardcore flight simulation where fans sleep in plywood cockpits and have no less than three LCD monitors. It's a serious franchise. Well, it was. The portable *Birds of Prey* streamlines everything.

Slipping you into Russian, British, and American planes while battling Germans from the Battle of Britain to the Battle of the Bulge, *Birds of Prey* offers a condensed view of World War II. Sloppy narration helps give perspective to each mission, which then starts midflight with no take offs or landings. Flying is also simplified, with complex maneuvers being a no-go. Simple, short, and fun, this is *IL-2 Sturmovik* if it were released alongside *Mortal Kombat 2* in a '90s arcade; fly around, shoot the hell out of some Nazis and repeat.

Yet it's not completely impossible to understand how this became a GameStop-only exclusive in stores (though you can download it too—we did). Some missions start your aircraft in the wrong direction, and sometimes a new objective spawns across an entire level after defeating what seemed like the final target. These annoyances don't make dogfighting with aces surrounded by falling machine gun shells any more exciting.

With a few multiplayer modes and replayable missions, *Birds of Prey* provides straightforward aerial combat. Strange that such a simple experience comes from such a hardcore background.

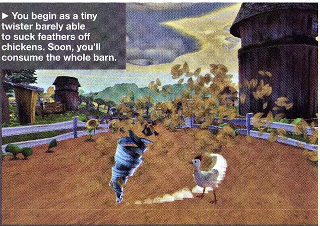
Carey Peck

★★★

Tornado Outbreak

Appetite for destruction

PS3 PRICE: $39.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+
PUBLISHER: Konami DEVELOPER: Loose Cannon Studios



► You begin as a tiny twister barely able to suck feathers off chickens. Soon, you'll consume the whole barn.

Tornados are fascinating purveyors of chaos and mayhem, and it's about time we got to play as one. *Tornado Outbreak's* bizarro-cartoon story casts you as the new leader of a pack of wind-powered space warriors huffing, puffing, and blowing to save the Earth from fiery little miscreants. Or something like that. It's ludicrously cheesy, but the good part is the gameplay, which involves you, as a living, steerable tornado, tearing the hell out of everything in sight. You'll motor through locales ranging from dinosaur parks to barnyards to cities, ripping things to pieces, vacuuming up everything from cows and people to buildings and flame-headed aliens, and growing larger and more powerful as you go.

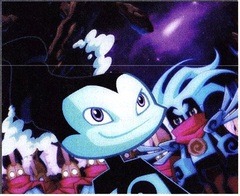
Tornado Outbreak's gameplay will be immediately familiar to anyone who's played the sticky-ball-rolling *Katamari* games—you're just sucking things up instead of rolling them into a morbid, junk-and-flesh snowball—but the twister mechanics feel compellingly obnoxious and make *Outbreak* worthwhile even if you know the basic drill.

Objects you're strong enough to destroy will rattle as you approach and erupt into a shower of satisfying debris on contact. Causing more devastation makes you larger, enabling you to tackle larger obstacles. You may begin a level barely strong enough to suck the feathers off a flock of chickens, but by the end you'll swell to cataclysmic proportions and raze entire buildings to their bare foundations.

The sheer fun this elicits is worth suffering through *Outbreak's* less-than-stellar aspects: the Saturday morning 'toon-style story and serviceable visuals that don't really push the hardware. Even the repetitive pacing and level structure can be forgiven, because it's simply fun to annihilate stuff.

Nathan Meunier

★★★



▼ This is you when you're not a tornado. Incredibly, this is the best your species can do.

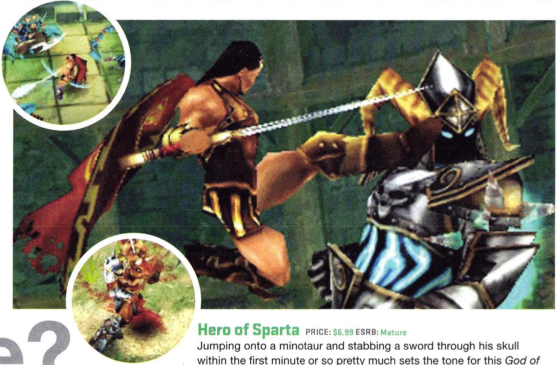
PlayStation Network

Multiplayer Strategies | Letters | Game Reviews | PlayStation Store

Have PSP Minis got game?

We turbo-chugged the launch line-up—here's what we kept down and what came back up

BY NATHAN MEUNIER

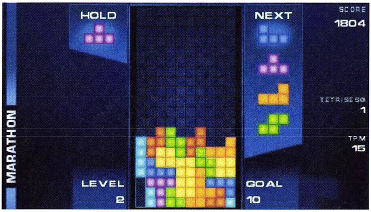


Hero of Sparta

PRICE: $6.99 **ESRB:** Mature

Jumping onto a minotaur and stabbing a sword through his skull within the first minute or so pretty much sets the tone for this *God of War*-inspired romp through hordes of mythological beasts that's heavy on the action and gore. There are a lot of cool attack combos to pull off, though you'll have to muddle through too many quick-time events. Still, the results are pretty impressive, like when you get stuck between two enemies who inadvertently decapitate one another when you suddenly duck. Good times.

The verdict: Though the iPhone version is cheaper, *Hero of Sparta* on the PSP has a few improvements in controls and visuals. Grab it.

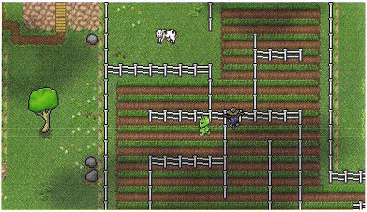


Tetris

PRICE: $9.99 **ESRB:** Everyone

It's hard to believe we're still captivated by *Tetris,* but we are. The core *Tetris* experience is alive and well on the PSP, but it's the unusual extra modes and unlockable achievements buried just beneath the surface that make this version so compelling. Our favorites of the 12 modes include Treadmill (all of the pieces shift one square to the right each turn), Flood (colorless blocks rise from the bottom every few turns), and Flashlight (you have only a tiny beam of light to illuminate the playfield).

The verdict: We had reservations before playing the pricey Mini version of *Tetris,* but it turns out this one is worth the dough.

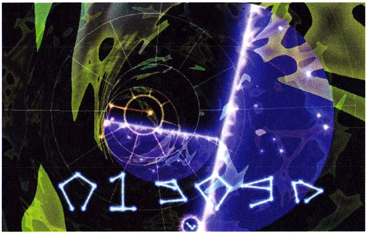


Alien Havoc!

PRICE: $4.99 **ESRB:** Everyone

This arcade-style Mini pits you as a little green guy who's stuck waddling around ye old farmstead in hopes of stealing cows and returning them to your ship—what, is the "beam me up" machine broken? Naturally, sneaky, pissed-off farmers come crawling out of the woodworks to kick your alien butt. It's a well-trodden theme and goofy premise that could have made for a fun game if it wasn't marred by frustrating gameplay and a lackluster presentation.

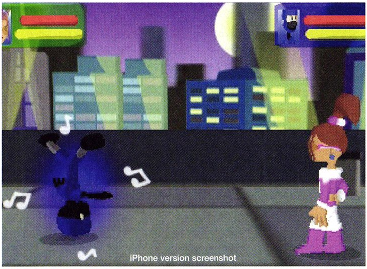
The verdict: Poor execution ultimately sinks ET's quest for the secret ingredient that makes hamburgers so damn delicious.



Brain Pipe PRICE: $4.99 ESRB: Everyone

This psychedelic and bizarre endurance racer sends you spiraling at high speeds through the winding tunnels of your mind, dodging snaking balls of electricity, mesh portals, and incandescent creatures. Aside from steering, which can be a little finicky, your sole ability is to temporarily slow down to regenerate. You'll also collect glyphs to "transcend humanity" and unlock your "true self." Yes, it's definitely weird. We love weird. You will too.

The verdict: This indie PC-to-PSP port is a great fit for the handheld. The fast-paced quest for "unhumanity" is a strange one. Just roll with it.

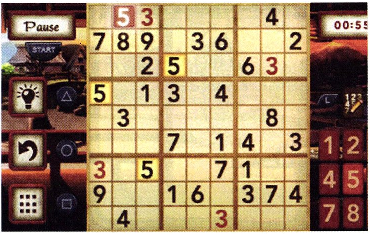


iPhone version screenshot

Funky Punch PRICE: $4.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+

Can you feel the funk? Well, something funky is going on here, and it's not necessarily of the groove-thing-shaking variety. Another update of an iPhone original, this silly brawler gives you 12 combatants who duke it out in simulated 3D. There are only a few moves, but it's funny when everyone on-screen stops in mid-battle to dance in place for a few seconds before resuming brutalizing one another. Funky Punch's cartoonish, low-budget fisticuffs pack some colorful personality and style, but everything feels a little too simplistic and sloppy.

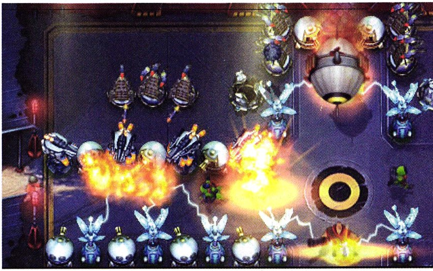
The verdict: Lo-fi charm doesn't totally save this funkadelic slap fight. We recommend passing on this one.



Sudoku PRICE: $4.99 ESRB: Everyone

Assuming you're part of the crowd who digs bending their brains around these grid-based number puzzles, you'll find yourself right at home with the no-frills setup and calming presentation found here. Hardcore *Sudoku* fiends will appreciate the Newspaper Mode, which lets you manually input puzzles from your local paper to play on your PSP, and cheaters have the option of punching the numbers into the grid to have the handheld solve them for you.

The verdict: It's a bit pricey and not particularly thrilling, but there are worse ways to get out your numerical ya-yas.



Fieldrunners PRICE: $6.99 ESRB: Everyone 10+

It rocked on iPhone, and it rocks here. Like other entries in the Tower Defense genre, you strategically arrange an assortment of deadly towers to thwart the scores of enemy soldiers that surge towards your base in increasingly stronger waves. There's nothing particularly flashy or fresh in the concept, but it's all a good time...particularly because lots of people will get hurt if you're doing your job right.

While the PSP version ditches the touch-screen interface, the D-pad setup works almost as well. It's a few bucks more than the iPhone version, but a handful of new enemy units, towers, maps, and some extra graphical flourishes add value to the PSP package.

The verdict: *Fieldrunners* is awesome. Buy it immediately.

$ 150
10100
20

Good little games, one big problem

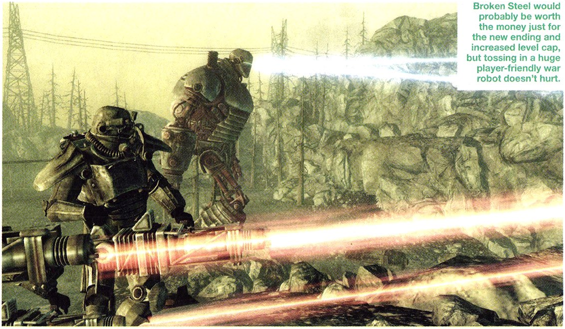
The Minis show promise, but there's one thing that bugs us: All but two of the launch Minis are iPhone ports—and more importantly, they're often cheaper on iPhone. Granted, most are still great fun and many have been enhanced. But it'll take a much broader array of new and original titles at competitive prices if Sony wants PSP Minis to be viewed as a legitimate brand with its own identity.

PlayStation Network Games

We rank all five *Fallout* expansion packs, then give you three choices for non-radioactive gaming on the cheap.

+ **YEA** You'll get full value for your money. Go for it.

− **NAY** Close but no cigars. Candy cigars, of course.



Broken Steel would probably be worth the money just for the new ending and increased level cap, but tossing in a huge player-friendly war robot doesn't hurt.

Broken Steel

+ **What is it?** A series of spec-ops and battlefield shoot-outs with the armored Brotherhood of Steel acting as your wingmen. Oh, and there's also a giant robot with laser eyes on your team.

Worth 10 bucks? Are you kidding? This is a rock-solid must-buy. Why? Because Broken Steel fixes the two biggest flaws in the original game. First, the ending: The main game literally stops dead when you finish the storyline. Broken Steel tweaks the conclusion so you can keep playing.

Secondly, Broken Steel raises the level cap from 20 to 30, adding in strong new perks like Almost Perfect, which raises all your base stats to at least 9, and Puppies!, which gives you a new canine companion if Dogmeat kicks it.

The actual missions turn out to be the least important part, but they're solid and you get very cool new gear like the Tesla Cannon—basically a lightning bazooka—the Tri-Beam Laser, and the powerfully heat-resistant Hellfire Armor.

Eric Bratcher

Mothership Zeta

What is it? − A straightforward shoot-a-thon through the corridors of a massive alien saucer.

Worth 10 bucks? Maybe not. There's no exploration or decision making—this is running down halls, vaporizing aliens and robots, flipping a switch, and repeating until the quick UFO-to-UFO shootout at the end. That said, it's also a motherlode of amazing energy weapons: the Drone Cannon, Alien Atomizer, Alien Disintegrator, and the incredible MPLX Novasurge. EB

Operation Anchorage

− **What is it?** A simulated military invasion of a Chinese-controlled mountain region.

Worth 10 bucks? Probably not. The icy terrain looks spiffy, and we enjoy battling the Crimson Dragoon enemies. But the lack of exploration or moral judgment, and only a few useful gear additions (winterized power armor, Chinese stealth armor, energy-based Gauss rifle, and electrified sword) make this our least favorite add-on. EB

Point Lookout

+ **What is it?** A rotting beachfront amusement park connected to a murky swamp. Population: irradiated inbreds, hordes of feral ghouls, a drugged-out cult and one disembodied brain with the power of mental projection.

Worth 10 bucks? Yep. There's a whole area to explore, treasure to find, and NPCs who offer additional side-missions. New weapons tend to be low-tech (axe, double-barreled shotgun), but be sure to grab the Microwave Emitter in the building where the Point Lookout story concludes (you'll know where). EB

The Pitt

+ **What is it?** A war between a ruler and his slaves in a rusting city lit by glowing molten steel—and on the verge of being overrun by plague-mutated, cannibalistic sub-humans.

Worth 10 bucks? Probably. The twisting catwalk-connected routes through multi-story buildings can make navigation difficult, but there are some interesting moral dilemmas, and the swarming trogs are a spooky new enemy. There's also a nice set of custom armor, a zillion punky raiders to kill, and a gruesome new melee weapon that's basically a rotary saw on a stick. EB

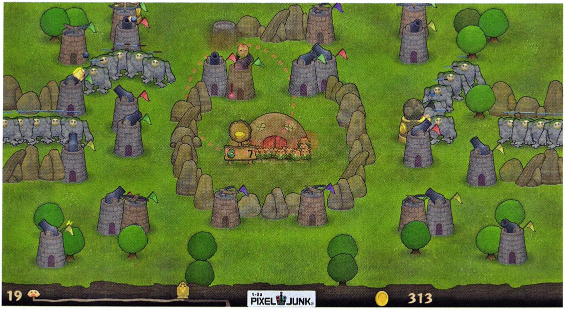
PixelJunk Monsters: Deluxe

PSP PRICE: $19.99 **ESRB:** Everyone **PUBLISHER:** SCEA **DEVELOPER:** Q-Games

PixelJunk Monsters, a simple yet intricate tower defense game, was a sleeper hit on the PS3 with cutesy art direction and an endless replayability that grabbed even the most cynical gamers. *PJM: Deluxe* includes the original game, the *Encore* expansion and the third *Deluxe* expansion. A near-flawless port of the PS3 title, players purchase, place, and upgrade towers armed with weapons like arrows, cannons, and flamethrowers to stop waves of adorable monsters from slaughtering the player's defenseless tribesmen.

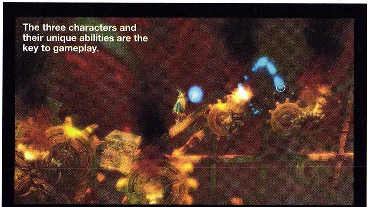
PJM: Deluxe seamlessly integrates new enemies, bosses, units and maps and supports both Ad Hoc and Online play. Gameplay has been tweaked in several subtle ways: the Ice Tower is permanently unlocked and Tesla Towers are cheaper to purchase, and the lethal Trap Tower and experience-giving Gem Tower are new additions. The difficulty can be wickedly tough, but *PJM* purists will be glad it hasn't changed. Beyond that, the game's only shortcoming is the inability to continually see the entire map at once. You can zoom out to a panoramic view using a shoulder button, but with a game this tough we'd love to be able to lock the camera in that zoomed-out position.

Doug Trueman



The art is simply amazing. How is it that giant rock golems with hockey masks can look so cute?

The zoomed-out view is critical to success—you have to know where the enemy is coming from.



The three characters and their unique abilities are the key to gameplay.

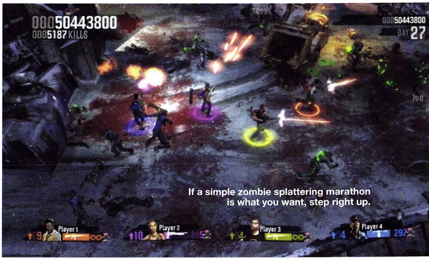
Trine

PS3 PRICE: $19.99 **ESRB:** Everyone **PUBLISHER:** Nobilis **DEVELOPER:** Frozenbyte

Like *LittleBigPlanet, Trine* is a scrolling platformer with physics-based puzzles. Like the classic game *The Lost Vikings,* you'll need to cycle through the three characters (thief, knight, and wizard), using their special abilities to navigate a traditional fantasy world filled with gorgeous lighting effects.

The puzzles are fun and inventive, and whether you're playing by your lonesome or in three-player local co-op, you'll get plenty of enjoyment out of *Trine*—though the combat does become a bit repetitive. Still, well worth a download, even at a slightly inflated price for a PSN game.

Richard Broughton



If a simple zombie splattering marathon is what you want, step right up.

Zombie Apocalypse

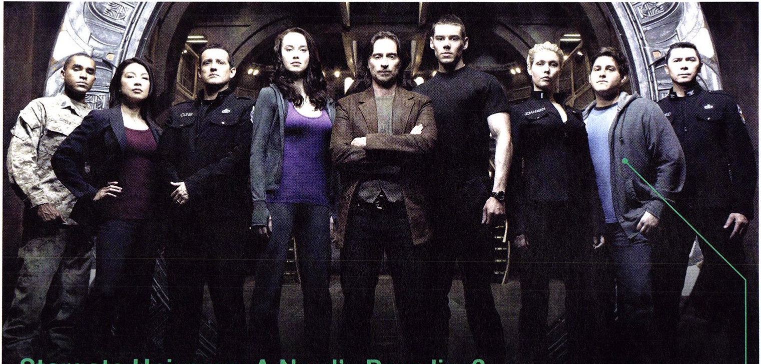
PS3 PRICE: $9.99 **ESRB:** Mature **PUBLISHER:** Konami **DEVELOPER:** Nihilistic Software

Zombie Apocalypse is what you'd get if *Left 4 Dead* got busy with the arcade game *Gauntlet.* Four player co-op, top-down view, undead pouring in from all sides... Time to start the bloodletting.

It's not bad. There's some variety in zombie types and behaviors, and it's always tense. The thing is, just like an arcade game of old, you can pretty much experience everything it has to offer in an hour. At some point you'll want more than mindless arcade fun.

Eric Bratcher

PSN Video Delivery Service



Stargate Universe: A Nerd's Paradise?

If you've been missing the latest *Stargate* spin-off—*Stargate Universe,* often-abbreviated *SGU*—you're missing what will likely be the SyFy network's biggest show since *Battlestar Galactica.* The show takes the portal-traveling premise of the series into a bold new direction, thanks largely to the *BSG*-style atmosphere and themes. An eclectic band of humans (including politicians) stuck on a spaceship are trying to get home, while visiting alien worlds and even exchanging bodies to communicate with Earth? *SGU* might not be completely original, but it boldly goes where both sci-fi fans and casual viewers will want to follow.

We caught up with the resident gamer on set, **David Blue**, who plays Eli Wallace—a gamer caught up in a science fiction wonderland. Blue gets to live out every gamer's dream on the show: hot babes, cool gadgets, and plenty of action. Nerds are in, and Blue is fully onboard to catch the wave.

"I'm definitely a nerd and a geek. It's no longer just guys like Tom Cruise [that people want]. Now you have guys like Seth Rogan, Justin Long, Jesse Eisenberg, and all these great nerdy types that are allowed to have lead roles.

It used to be if you were a dork, you would hide it. Now, it's really cool when a girl admits she's a geek; it makes her hotter. When a guy does it, it means he's smart. It's no longer this social stigma. It's kind of become this mainstream thing, and thank God. We don't have to hide anymore."

Blue does a pretty good job of walking the walk—he's a life-long gamer, TV, and movie addict. "I love videogames—my videogame library is ridiculous—but then on top of that I watch so many TV shows and movies that I sometimes wonder how I have the time. I'm proud of Eli because I feel like I'm representing so many people that I know. You'll get to see more than the quiet nerd guy [with Eli].

I've always been a huge fan of RPGs, [especially] *Final Fantasy.* I like swords and axes more than machine guns. But, I'm a huge fan of *Fallout 3.* It's hard to find the time to finish the game, but the ones that I have, I become obsessed over. *Fallout 3* is one, *Assassin's Creed, Batman: Arkham Asylum...* They're like TV shows or movies that you can play. And at the end of day if we [the cast] all want to unwind, it's nice to kick some ass on a shooter that you can really sink your teeth into."

Stargate Universe should be gearing up for its second season soon. In the meantime, if you missed it on SyFy, season one hits DVD in early 2010, and is available for download on the PlayStation Store now.

TOP VDS DOWNLOADS

"It's obvious what I'm really observing, isn't it?"

MOVIES

Observe and Report
Ghosts of Girlfriends Past
Adventureland
Crank 2: High Voltage
Next Day Air

TV SHOWS

House
Family Guy
The Ultimate Fighter | Season 10
The Cleveland Show
Sons of Anarchy | Season 2

PlayStation®

The Official Magazine

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PlayStation 3
PlayStation Portable
PlayStation Network
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PlayStation
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ARKHAM ASYLUM
"You're in the real world now and the lunatics have taken over the asylum."
SAVE 79%

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- **Interviews with the senior executives and game designers shaping the future of PlayStation**
- **Very latest news on downloads and games available on the PlayStation Network**

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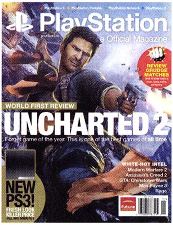
Letters

Feedback, Insight, Bloopers, and Daily Affirmations



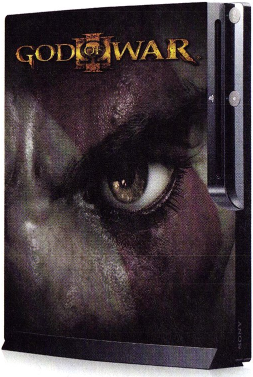
▲ This month's conversation starter

→ MYTHOLOGICAL PS3

Is there any word on a *God of War*-themed PS3 when the new game releases? I am holding out on buying a PS3 in hopes of seeing one with Kratos on it! Maybe you will stop my suffering by shining some light on the subject.

Mean Greene, via email

While game-themed PSPs are common, actual special edition PS3s (not bundles) are rare. We too, would love to see a new PS3 kitted out in *God of War* garb. Are you listening Sony?



◄ Last year's limited edition *Metal Gear Solid 4* gunmetal gray 40GB PS3 was exclusive and pricey, but not all that visually daring. We think Kratos deserves better. (Don't get all excited though, we mocked this one up.)

HATERADE

I sent you a letter and asked you to make a comment or statement about EA's *Battlefield: Bad Company* servers not working. Either you are a bunch of [bleep bleeps] scared of what EA would have to say about it or a bunch of money hungry [bleeps] in Sony's pocket. All you cover in your letters section is "chic accessories for fashionable gamers" and the always popular YOUR MOM IS A CLASSY LADY. Are you guys a bunch of [bleeping] IDIOTS? I mean come on, I have over a thousand dollars invested in this [bleep] and you're trying to sell me [bleep] for 12-year-olds instead of telling the [bleeping] truth. Get over your [bleeping] selves and tell people there is a problem with these servers instead of hiding behind the name PLAYSTATION.

Steven, via email

Man, Steven, you sure do get irritable when you don't get your daily quotient of headshots. Three points for you to digest: First, we can't answer every single letter we get. Secondly, we tend not to choose letters written by someone who calls us names and curses like a 12 year-old who just saw his first Tarantino movie. Grow some class. Finally, EA jumped on the issue promptly, so by the time we wrote about it in the mag, it would have been fixed—and it has been—so, we chose to write about something relevant instead.

"Perhaps you guys are not as geeky as subscribers were led to believe?" ↘

CONTROVERSY OF THE MONTH

IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN...AND WRONG

Just when I thought I had a magazine that completely catered to my geeky interests I was let down and crushed when I read your October 2009 issue. On page 9 you have a small article about the HIGHLY anticipated sequel *Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2* that points out how [bleeping] awesome it will be to see the fusion of powers blah blah blah...but you wrote "Green Lantern and Venom?!" Green Lantern is DC! Not Marvel! So does the game not only mix powers but comic universes as well? There's no hope for me now, I feel soooo lost!

smittytibbs, via email

Was that on purpose to make sure we're paying attention or does someone at PTOM need to enroll in comic book characters 101?

Allan Leshchinsky, Lake Orion MI

My immediate reaction was, wow, how much did it cost Marvel to get him in the game?

Memo, via email

HE'S DC, NOT MARVEL! OF ALL THE AMATURE [*sic*] MISTAKES TO MAKE!

Lynxvanness, via email

Perhaps you guys are not as geeky as subscribers were led to believe?

K-Tuck, via email

WE'RE GOOD ENOUGH, SMART ENOUGH…

First, I would like to start my humble letter with a kind gesture of praising your magazine. I love it. But almost every issue has the same mundane letters some kid spits out at random and you *actually* print it in your magazine. It seems at the point where you should just rename the whole section "Rants, whining, and asking PTOM to do things any reasonable person would know that they cannot." We know you're smarter than the 10-year-old that says "N00B" every other word. You guys really don't have to prove it every issue.

kdevil02, via email

But what fun would it be if every letter were sane and reasonable like yours, kdevil?

Um, thanks?

AND DOGGONE IT, PEOPLE LIKE US

I was at my local WAL-MART, casually looking at the latest PS3 games when I noticed a few copies of *Batman: Arkham Asylum* on *sale*. Thinking something was up, I asked an employee and she said it was a promo price that was valid until midnight. I took a look at my watch and saw I had 15 minutes to make up my mind!

Not wanting to waste over 40 dollars on a game I wasn't sure about, I quickly walked over to the magazine stand, and lo and behold the newest issue of PTOM. Not only that, it had a review of *Arkham Asylum!* I opened it up and saw that you guys gave a perfect score. Well, that sealed the deal, I purchased the game and have been playing it ever since. Thank you PTOM for preventing me from missing out on an awesome game at a great price!

Paul Deaville II, Jennings LA

It's letters like yours, Paul, that make all the hard work and long hours worthwhile. *sniff*

EXCEPT FOR THE CANADIANS

You have thanked us Canadians for Nickelback [Sarcasm much, Dave?], you have also helped defend our honor as gamers in Canada from those who slander us in letters to your magazine [We have?] BUT how is it that every winner in the "Quote Contest" is never Canadian? I have answered three so far correctly, and while yes, I can't possibly expect to win against thousands of Canadians and Americans…but still, Canadians love movies too.

Dave, via email

You're right…the winner of the November issue contest will be a Canadian. Oops, we forgot, there's no more Quote Contest.

y r u dissing us canadians? we're ur neighbors for @#$%ing god's sake. wut gives u the right to dis us in ur mag (September issue) y shouldn't we say that ur @#$%ing [censored]? We canadians are not fragile!! i'd come over and show you bunch of idiots how "fragile" we canadians are but i dont have the coin to do so.

JUSTIN, via email

Okay, Canadians aren't fragile… just poor.

ON THE DOWNLOAD

With the future of videogames headed towards downloadable content more and more, how is this going to affect the consumer? Will games only be available on the PlayStation Store or will there be other online venues to purchase games? With UMDs, we have the ability to purchase games from hundreds of locations and at discounted costs. With downloadable games, it seems the only place we would be able to get games from are the PlayStation Store or possibly from the developer online. As someone who is on a budget, I worry I will have to wait an extremely long time to afford games I want as downloadable games don't seem to go "on sale" much. And I think if I'm not buying a physical disc I shouldn't be charged the same price as the disc-based version of the same game.

Gabe, via email

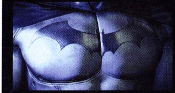
You bring up some great points, Gabe. But if the music industry model is any indication, it seems that downloadable content will play an ever-increasing role in our gaming lives. Amazon just started selling DLC (see pg. 17), and there may be new options as well. Services like iTunes allow people to select specific songs to purchase from an album. Will gamers someday have the option to purchase specific play modes like Single-player- or Online Multiplayer-only?

MEDIA-TIONS

In your October issue you had an article about media server apps for the PS3. Here are two more programs I think you should have

Reader Hai(ku)lights

THE GOOD…
Co-op mission fun
Six-axis makes stuff jiggle
Ninja Gaiden bliss!
– Dominic Martin, via email



THE BAT…
Bat symbol shining,
The criminals running scared,
The night is still young.
– Argel319, via email

AND THE UGLY
Jingle bells,
Rob Smith rules,
Roger laid an egg,
Teresa farted, something smells,
and the Joker got away, hey!
– Dylan, via email

Either you guys gave away the biggest spoiler in the game or someone had DC on the brain when they were writing the article.

Adria Kovaly, Erie PA

Get the facts straight guys, GL is a DC character NOT a Marvel character. However, the real issue here is who is the biggest dork, you for not knowing that bit of basic information or me for being outraged enough take the time to email you about it?

Tical2399, via email

I am not writing to slam you guys on your comic knowledge, I just wanted to point out the mistake you made. But I do think the author of the article needs to brush up on some comic reading. Just so something like this never happens again, and you get an even longer letter from some over the top fanboy, going into greater detail of why this cannot happen. That is if it hasn't already happened.

C.Longmore, via email

Okay, okay! We get it—we screwed up. Actually, we blame Rob—mainly because he's no longer here and he turned in the story about three seconds before he skipped out the door. Of course, Roger should have caught the error, but the coffee machine was broken that day so he was barely functional. Suffice it to say though, when it comes to rivalries, Xbox vs. PlayStation has nothing on Marvel vs. DC.

▼ Okay, maybe Green Lantern won't be joining Venom in *MUA2*, but their love can't be denied forever.

What's that smell?
talk radar
WEEK OF BABES
gamesradar WEEK OF HATE 2009
TOP 7 EVERY MONDAY
Originality
games radar
WHAT'S THAT SMELL? ORIGINALITY
FRESH GAMING CULTURE
STRONGEST BOREDOM-FIGHTING FEATURES ANYWHERE • MOST WIN PER CAPFUL OF ANY GAME SITE • BRILLIANCE AND MADNESS IN EVERY PODCAST • GETS SCREENSHOTS BRIGHTER • SPECIALLY BLENDED VIDEOS • LEAVES BRAIN SOFT AND REFRESHED
gamesradar.com

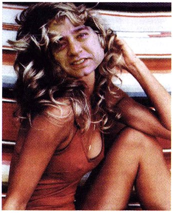
included: Windows Media Player and Java PS3 Media Server.

I only mention Windows Media Player because it comes with windows, I didn't have much luck with it, but for most people it's already there and just a couple of clicks away to use.

And the other, Java PS3 Media server (http://ps3mediaserver.blogspot.com/), I think is the best. It's completely free, no pro version or anything, and also multiplatform, which is handy for those who use a Mac or Linux. And one of the best reasons to use it is that it can transcode videos that would be incompatible with the PS3 on the fly, this is great for people like me who watch things like anime with soft subtitles (and possibly more than one language) in an .MKV container.

Sonicjosh, via email

The rest of you pay attention: Let Sonicjosh's philanthropy serve as an example to us all.



▲ Be careful what you wish for.

POSTER BOYS

I just thought I'd drop a line and say thanks for continuing to have posters in your magazine. I've subscribed to many game mags over the years and noticed that posters have pretty much gone away. I have a room to display all the things I find cool, and posters are a big part—the *Uncharted 2* poster is on my wall now.

Aaron, via email

YAY POSTERS, MORE PLEEZ
K ByE

Mikey, via email

Usually when there's a pullout poster in a gaming mag, one side is a mediocre game and the other side is even worse... But to have *Uncharted 2* on one side and *LittleBigPlanet* on the other—wow, I need a joint custody system! (*U2* took MWF, *LBP* has TTh, with alternating Sundays.) Any chance we're getting more sweet goodies like this in the future?

Ryan, Pilesgrove NJ

Well, we can't take full credit on this one as posters are usually included at the discretion of the game companies. But we'll let 'em know you love them, with hopes for more to come.

WELCOME TO 1997

I received my October '09 issue and as always, tore into it, devouring each page of goodies as I went along. Problem is, when I got to Letters, I was crushed by the *Final Fantasy: Crisis Core* spoiler from some guy named Nik.

Due to having *cough* another system *cough* I missed out on some *FF* games. When I got a PSP the first game I bought was *FF: Crisis Core.* Then I saw that Sony put *FFVII* on the PSN store and downloaded it, but decided to wait until I finished *Crisis Core* to play it.

Well, this Nik guy totally broke my heart and my yen for the game. He made mention of how he didn't want to see [SPOILER ALERT?!] Aerith die again. Um, I hadn't made it that far...and to be honest, it somewhat sucked the fun out of it. I was surprised that you printed that little nugget of information that I could of done without.

Starblayze, via email

We feel for ya, Starblayze. But really, it's been *12 years* since *FFVII* released! The Statute of Spoiler Limitations has expired.

WELCOME TO 2003

Since you guys have contacts in the gaming world I was wondering if you knew about Atari's plans to maybe make a *Matrix* game for the PS3. I am fully aware the previous two games weren't that great but I think that a *Matrix* game could be pretty good. The graphics would be top notch (and the visuals were the hallmark of the movies) and the PS3 would be very capable of doing anything the *Matrix* universe needs. Maybe they could make a prequel to the movies, (since they already did the continuation of the story with *The Matrix Online)* since telling the story in different mediums was the Wachowskis original plan.

PJ, via email

Here PJ, swallow this red pill. Now, when a movie series becomes a mainstay on non-premium cable channels it's because nobody cares anymore. So there won't be a new *Matrix* game…unless the Wachowski bros start hurting for money and crank out another movie.

DIMENSIONALLY CHALLENGED

Until your October cover story on James Cameron's *Avatar,* I hadn't even the slightest inkling what *Avatar* was, save that a game and a movie were coming out 'round the holidays. But if... Wait, no... WHEN movies and games jump into the third dimension, I will eventually have to abandon my hobby, because I hate three-dimensional media—*Spy Kids 3-D* (wow, did that suck) is a good example of why. The "3D" gimmick didn't even work—the image was still flat, all the glasses did was get rid of the red and blue lines, and it gave me a headache. I understand that the stereoscopic TV's aren't the same as the old red-and-blue garbage, but that won't help with the headaches and unless your friends also have stereoscopic glasses, they can't watch/play with you and get the full effect. I'm just old-fashioned that way, even though I'm still in high school.

Alex, via email

So young and so jaded, Alex. Remember, the naysayers said Smell-O-Vision would never take off either. Oh, wait...

WE GOT THE LOOK

I want to give huge props to whoever does your magazine's cover and designs. They always catch my eye more than any other magazine. (Besides *Maxim*—ha ha) I think the *Avatar* one was my favorite, keep it up!

Jason, via email

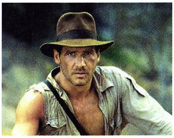
That would be Art Director Ken Bousquet, who doesn't receive nearly as much recognition as he deserves for making us look so good.

SINNER

I am sending this message from the fourth circle of hell—I think we

Treasure Trove

Todd Burnett of the Internet is the winner of the November issue's Reviews Intro Page contest. Here's what he dug up on the adventurers in our rating scale.

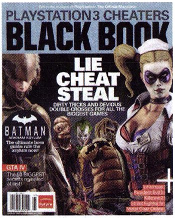


The first picture is Professor Henry "Indiana" Jones, Jr. He is a "Professor of archaeology, expert on the occult, and, uh, how does one say it? Obtainer of rare antiquities." He discovered Tanis [Actually the Nazis did that, but he found the Well of Souls, so close enough. *–ed.],* the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, and the Ark itself and the Holy Grail.

Next is Benjamin Franklin Gates, a historian and amateur cryptologist with a mechanical engineering degree from MIT and an American History degree from Georgetown. He comes from a long line of treasure hunters that believe that the Founding Fathers hid a fantastic trove of artifacts and gold.

The third picture is of Allan Quatermain (with Jesse Huston at his side), an English-born professional big game hunter and occasional trader in southern Africa. He is famous for his search for the missing brother of English Aristocrat Sir Henry Curtis who disappeared while on a quest for the fabled King Solomon's Mine.

What do these three pictures have in common? They are all inspirations for November issue cover boy, Nathan Drake, a modern-day counterpart and amalgamation of these classic pulp-type characters. Drake will no doubt be remembered just as fondly as these other characters and held in the same regards by future generations as he carves out his niche in the adventure game genre.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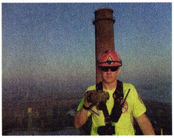
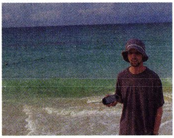
▲ Really, it's an awesome resource, but do us a favor and skip page 70.

PSP a go go



Slippery Little Sucker
I've always seen the pictures in the back of PTOM with people and their PSPs. Here's a picture of my little buddy and me at 500 feet. I live in Greenup, KY and work on the road doing standby rescue service. In the pic, I'm on a stack in St. Louis, MO and unless something happens, the day can be very long! Who needs an American Express card, I wouldn't leave home without my PSP!

Matt Boggs, via email



Dude, your PSP looks so relaxed...
Attached is a pic of my PSP and me on Bavaro Beach in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic. My wife and I recently took a belated honeymoon there for our three-year anniversary. It was the "off-season" but the weather was perfect, being sunny and warm everyday. My wife brought her DS to play *Dragon Quest 9* (yeah, she's Japanese so she can easily play imports). [A DS?! Sounds like grounds for a divorce, Robert.]

Robert Giroux, via email

know I'm speaking of Avarice. You see I didn't want to be networked, I didn't want Trophies, I wanted my games all for me, me, me, me, and then it happened. I purchased my copy of *Madden 2010,* I raced home and tore the packing apart and was blissful UNTIL one morning when the Minnesota Vikings declared "We signed No. 4, Brett Favre." With a rush of excitement I grabbed my PS3 manuals to learn how to venture online to download the Favre *Madden* update... I repent, I repent, I repent…for not being online before. Now to grab all the TROPHIES I can get and hoard them all for myself!

Amber, via email

We're not quite sure whether being a Trophy whore falls under Lust or Gluttony, but sounds like you're all ready for *Dante's Inferno*, Amber.

PART DOH

Okay, I want to start off by saying I am an avid reader of your magazine, and guilty to the *nth* degree of being a PS3 fanboy. The other day I picked up your new PS3 Cheaters Black Book, but what really caught my attention though, was the *"GTA IV: Lost and Damned"* cheats and hints section. Were my eyes deceiving me? *GTA IV: The Lost and the Damned* in a PlayStation 3 cheat book? Is this a trick, or weird cruel joke to us PS3 lovers? I thought this expansion was an X360 exclusive?

Mike, via email

Ouch. Although you're the first to notice, Mike, this slip-up makes us long for the days of the Green Lantern beatdown. Yes, that is a *GTA IV: TLTD* section in our *Cheaters Black Book,* but no, *TLTD* hasn't been announced for PS3. But if it ever does show up, we're going to look like freakin' clairvoyant geniuses. Sorry for the confusion.

BIG WORDS

You guys use a lot of small confusing words that look misspelled. I'm serious, I've never heard the word "disparate" before—I thought you meant "desperate." Another thing, it's always been my dream for PTOM to use the word "Pneumonoultramicroscopicvolcanoe-siliconiosis" in an issue, it would make you guys sound really smart too. Now that would be the day…

Juan, via email

Sure, we could sound smart *or* it could backfire since the word isn't in the spellchecker. But we ran it anyway, because we live on the edge.

SUNRISE...

I am so glad to see you back Eric. I always enjoyed your original personality and humor that you injected into the magazine. I have to admit I was one of your biggest fans back in the day. When you left though, didn't you realize that you not only left the magazine but readers like me? I just couldn't let you get away like that. So every once in a while I like to come over to your place and just watch you through your window while your munching on Cheetos and playing *WOW* for hours on end. But seriously, don't call the popo. I am glad to see you back.

You should consider trimming your hedges though.

Maurice, via email

Hey Eric, your stalker's back.

SUNSET

I've been subscribed to PTOM for about a year now, and in that year I've grown fond of the quirkiness of some of you guys but just when I'm getting used to Rob, he leaves. Noooooooooo! Why?! I hope no one else leaves—that wouldn't be too comforting. :(

Dominick, via email

Oh, great. There went Teresa. Thanks for jinxing us, Dominick.

STARRY EYED

I have noticed that you guys seem to rate an awful lot of games with five stars. Do you really think that *Fight Night Round 4, Batman: Arkham Asylum,* and *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* were nearly, if not, perfect enough for five stars?

Carla, via email

Perfection is an illusion, Carla. Our five star rating is for games so good we'd kick ourselves if we missed out on playing them.

THAT'S PRETTY MUCH HOW IT WORKS

Do you guys base your game ratings just a little bit on your opinions? Like when you guys reviewed *HAZE,* you gave it 2.5 stars. (I know it sucks.) But I think that you based it on your opinions. (Just a little.)

Brandon, via email

We keep trying to use other people's opinions but they keep suing us.

LETTERS ON LETTERS

Do you read all the letters or just random? Because I have sent better letters than those people that you choose to print or at least tell us if you only read a few then ignore the rest.

Rafael, via email

You got us. We read everybody's, but ignore yours—except this time…so you know that we're specifically singling you out.

I've been wondering this for a while, but who responds to the letters in the Letters section? Who does it? Is it Scott making those witty comments about people's thoughts, or do you make Carlos do it? I think that it'd take someone very funny to take this job. And whoever does it, does his/her job well!

Alex, via email

Unfortunately, that information is classified as Hollywood-headhunters are always trying to poach our best Letters section writers.

contact Send your thoughts and comments to PTOM_Letters@futureus.com. But it's okay if you send us snacks too—we're hungry.

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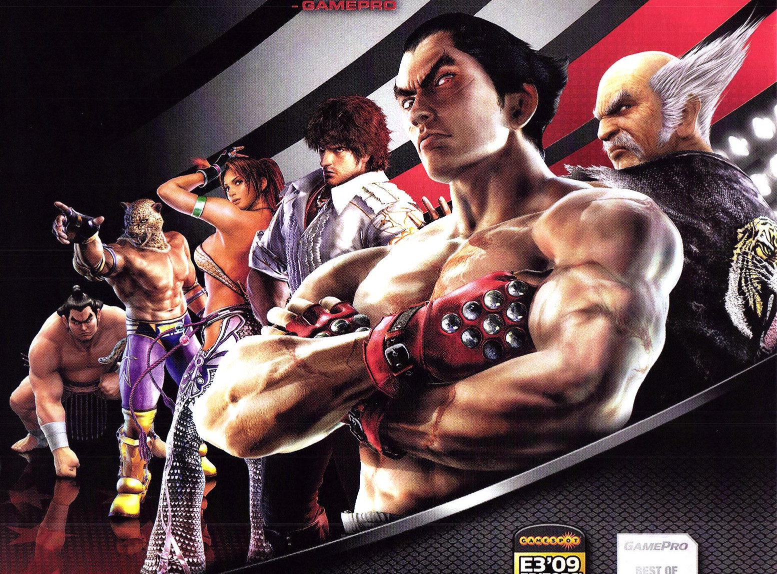

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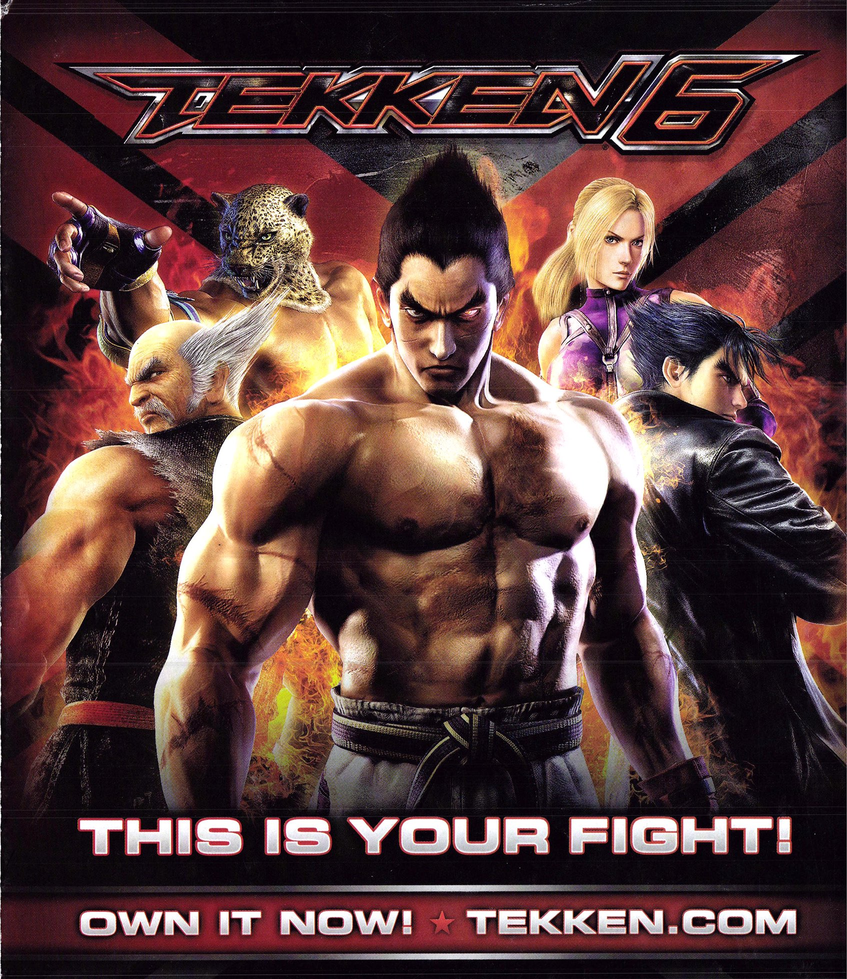

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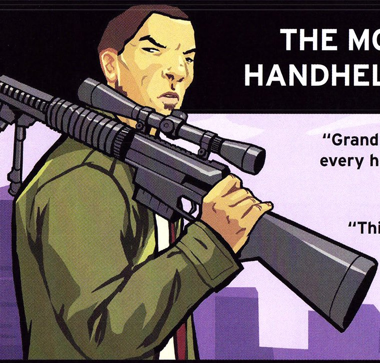

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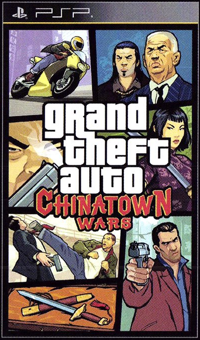

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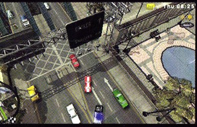

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